

# CONCERN

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## FAITHFULNESS – YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND FOREVER

By Rev. Dr. William R. Fritz

Christian ministers and lay people know that when we witness within a culture that is largely humanist, rationalistic, and secular – a culture often antagonistic toward the Christian faith – we will face adversity and outright hostility.

*There is a cost for discipleship.* Jesus spelled this cost out clearly:

- Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Matt. 10:38)
- Whoever saves his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt. 10:39)
- In this world you will have adversity; but be of good courage, for I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

**We follow the ONE who declares I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD** (John 8:12). Jesus also says, *YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD*. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand. And it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

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I regret that so many faithful witnesses – pastors and people – have left our United Church. I understand their reasons, but we have lost a good number of staunch advocates for the faith.

Those of us who continue the struggle, however, do so with courage and steadfast faith:

– There are many who continue to pray, to work, to witness, to contribute money, and to hold high the cross of Christ.

– There are others who courageously stand, speak, and write articles and books advocating the Church’s need for renewal and faithful witness.

– There are ministers in churches large and small who preach, teach, exhort, correct, and guide the congregations in biblical faithfulness.

A year ago the United Church *Observer* asked what has happened to all the renewal movements within our Church. The article concludes that pastors and people from these various movements have shifted their energy from Presbyteries, Conferences, and General Council to focus their work and witness within their local church. The local congregation is still the basic cell group of the Church. As my friend Frank Lockhart says, “You can take away Presbytery, Conference, and General Council and still have a Church. But you can’t take away the local congregation and still have a Church.”

I am a member of a United Church congregation where pastors and people are faithful disciples of Christ. As I worship with some other churches I am heartened to discover many with strong Christ-centred preaching and solid adult Bible study. In fact some of our largest congregations are in this category. These churches are alive and are producing disciples, and are wistfully envied by those who have lost their gospel.

But there are times when we feel quite alone. We are marginalized. We are voices crying in the wilderness. I know from personal experience what it’s like

- to have former friends turn away
- to be disciplined by Presbytery
- to have faithful people that you count on leave your congregation because they can no longer stand the pressure.

Yet we are not the first to stand for faithfulness. Nor will we be the last.

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In our times, so-called new theologies seem to appear about once every decade:

GOD IS DEAD – the 60’s  
LIBERATION – the 70’s  
FEMINIST – the 80’s  
GENERIC – the 90’s

And today: The NEW THEOLOGY called PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY

This is: Christianity without Christ  
Spirituality without the Holy Spirit  
and Godliness without God

These “new theologies” are not new. They are simply patches on old worn-out ones, and as disciples of Christ we are called to continue strong. Thousands of years ago the prophets of Israel, too, discovered that only a few were faithful to the one true God. Like them,

- We may feel alone; but we are called to costly discipleship.
- We may feel alone; but there are other faithful men and women.
- We may feel alone; but God is with us.

And it just may be that in the days ahead, you and I may discover that God, our God, is doing a new thing in our very midst.

*Note: This is a highly condensed version of Bill Fritz’s stirring address at our 20th Anniversary celebration.*

# Thanks for the Memories

Bob Hope’s theme song could have been ours as we gathered around at lunch time and three former presidents – Bill Fritz, John Trueman, and Allen Churchill – cut the anniversary cake. The balloons, the pink-striped tablecloth, the beautiful floral arrangement in front of a proud COC poster labelled “Standing for the Historic Christian Faith” – all these shouted “celebration!”. And the display of over 40 newsletters and other memorabilia plus the unique Outreach map featuring over 30 dedicated correspondents made us proud of our past, and gave us hope for the future even as we brushed away tears when we saw faces of those no longer with us. Memories, memories.

Best of all, the people *did* come (including a whole contingent from Bill Fritz’s former Barrie congregation) – more members than we had ever had since 1997 when we began holding our sessions in Ryerson United Church!

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Now for the highlights of the business meeting.

- Outreach Secretary Elsie Riva reported that this past year our Outreach Correspondents sent some 980 letters (which is more than last year) to COC members.
- Treasurer Peter Cade presented the Financial Statement for 2007:
  - Total income .....\$76,787.59
  - Total expenses.....\$71,231.37
- Vice-President David Dawson presented the Budget for 2008: \*
  - Total income .....\$83,325.00
  - Total expenses.....\$82,420.00

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\* A detailed 2008 budget is available on request from the COC office.

- Election of Board of Directors for 2008:
 

Rosemary Best	Fenwick, ON
Peter Cade	Mississauga, ON
David Dawson	Hamilton, ON
Gladys Douglas	Weston, ON
John Foster	Charlottetown, PE

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|-----------------|---------------------|
| Margaret Hunter | Scotland, ON        |
| Wilbur James    | Nanaimo, BC         |
| Elsie Riva      | Mississauga, ON     |
| Leonard Ross    | Melfort, SK         |
| John Trueman    | Hamilton, ON        |
| Hubert Tucker   | Nippers Harbour, NL |
| John Wilkie     | Guelph, ON          |

The morning meeting ended with members having a chance to get a peek at the history of COC which the Truemans have been working on for four years. They have now completed a 375-page first draft. John began by outlining some of the difficulties entailed in writing any history – especially this one! – and went on to read Chapter 11: “The Ties that Bind”, an account of how the Community of Concern evolved into what Bill Fritz has termed “essentially a lay movement”. When time permits (will it ever?) we plan to revise the whole manuscript and then go about finding a publisher.

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As we broke for lunch there was the joy of mingling with old friends, many of them originals, and dozens of tasty sandwiches disappeared as people looked at the displays and book table. One person, however, missed much of this as she grabbed a couple of sandwiches and hurried off to get set up for the hymn sing. The Trueman dining-room table had been covered with hymn and gospel books while Dawn made a list – to be pared down to the few choices time allowed. And how the audience sang them! They were a thrill to hear, and we were profoundly moved by Debbie Szabo’s beautiful rendition of *Amazing Grace* and *How Great Thou Art*.

Our speaker was a very important COC original – Bill Fritz, our first President, introduced, most fittingly, by another original, Fred Skelly. We were inspired and uplifted as we listened to Bill, and were reminded once again how much we owe to his courage and dedication in taking on the challenging (and hazardous) role of heading up the new-born organization.

We ended our day with Communion, administered by Rev. Brian Wilkie. It was a quiet ending to an afternoon that began with the rafters ringing with gospel songs. It had been a day never to be forgotten.

Thanks, dear friends, for the memories!

## 20 YEARS – OH! FOR 20/20 VISION

*The March issue’s description of one of the earliest meetings of COC has resulted in our receiving some welcome accounts of others memories. The following is one of them, this by a great soldier for Christ, Rev. Gervis Black.*

Reading Dawn Trueman’s rehearsal of the birth of the Community of Concern in the March edition of *Concern* sent me off on my own walk down memory lane. I left my Ottawa congregation of 14 years and moved to London in the same year...1988. I picked up the torch that Metropolitan Church had been carrying under Dr. Maurice Boyd, and tried to steer the ship through the storm that had already broken and was intensifying in

fury. And General Council was announced to meet in London in 1990.

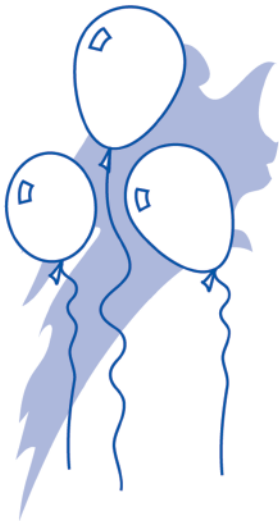
Anticipating that meeting, I called a group of sympathetic clergy and laity to join me at Metropolitan several months beforehand. I had set aside a modest room thinking there might be a prayer meeting crowd, say a dozen and a half. I don’t remember the actual number, but our spirits soared as we were forced to



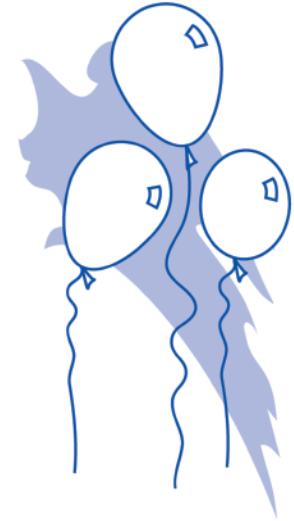
It takes three Presidents to cut one cake! John Trueman and Bill Fritz guide Allen Churchill's hand as he wields the knife.



Food and fun. Fred Skelly steps up to the plate, and Margaret Dahms looks the field over. Behind Fred is Phil Cline (something must be funny!), while at the other end of that line Carol Robinson hopes they'll leave something for her!



Here it is – the festive table, the balloons, the birthday cake, the newsletters hanging from a line in the background, and to the right our soloist, Debbie Szabo, sampling the food.



Dawn Trueman introduces our star, Debbie Szabo, Choir Director at Erskine Presbyterian, before the rafters ring with gospel songs. (P.S. Her solos were simply breathtaking.)



A moment of meditation as Rev. Brian Wilkie prepares us for the celebration of Communion before sending us out into the world.

*Photos by Peter Cade*

re-convene in a more spacious area. I proposed that momentous day that, as the Community of Concern was formed to mobilize and embolden individual stalwarts in our churches, it would be a reinforcing step forward if whole congregations, wanting to register their stand, could do so. Plainly, the issues rending the national Church needed confronting from more than isolated persons. Hence the new organization's birth that God-favoured day – the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations.

With General Council to hold its sessions in the Alumni Hall of the University of Western Ontario, I shared a dream that we make a bold statement to the commissioners by a dramatic march to the Hall, rather like Luther's nailing his 95 theses to the door at Wittenberg. Some will remember that moving event when an estimated 1500 United Church saints from Vancouver Island to Newfoundland marched about a mile to stand before the Hall's main door. We intended to sing some of the stirring hymns of the faith there, and were prepared with an electric organ on a truck. But Dr. Mills, the Secretary of General Council, barred the way and refused to let us plug into an outlet just a few feet away. The Moderator, Sang Chul Lee, was inside but did not appear. So much for the boasted *inclusivity* he claimed. Apparently those hundreds of pilgrims from pastorates across the country, many in tears, did not belong to *his* church.

And how many returned, disheartened, to shrinking fellowships...and in tens of thousands of cases, to severance from their beloved, perhaps life-long, loyalties? Me? I travelled to the Maritimes and Newfoundland, to B.C. and Alberta, pleading with

our people not to leave, but not to roll over and play dead either...but to "stand up, stand up for Jesus". A lot of ministers were too timid to open their churches to me. But I spoke in hotels and schools and wherever I could.

Rev. Charles R. Catto expressed my view beautifully in a letter to the *Observer* last year. He wrote of "those who remember with pride when The United Church was vibrant and bursting with overflowing congregations, and most of all a triumphant feeling that Jesus Christ is the answer to all our problems."

I'm no longer in the trenches, but I have to say that my love for The United Church has not diminished. Though I have had a lover's quarrel with her for these 20 years, I have never been tempted to bail out, and I pray feelingly for a new day under God. But the price of this will be purity of heart, obedience to the will of God. If He is first in our lives, if our meat is to do His will, if we desire Him above all things, then God will not allow any truly good thing to fail at last, even though for now our pain seems terminal.

One of my favourite hymns begins with these words from the seventh century, and every time I sing it, it turns my wishbone into a backbone:

*Christ is made the sure foundation,  
Christ the head and cornerstone,  
Chosen of the Lord, and precious,  
Binding all the Church in one;  
Holy Zion's help forever,  
And her confidence alone.*

**WATCH FOR IT!!! Coming this summer — OUR REMODELLED WEBSITE:  
[www.communityofconcern.org](http://www.communityofconcern.org). We hope it will eventually be interactive.**



It's been a long and harsh winter. How we have longed for the sun to be warm again, to walk free of boots, to sit on our porch and listen to birds singing! But there is always a first sign of hope: our brave little crocuses peeking through the snow, and blooming victoriously as it melts.

COC has had its winters too – like the time when we almost despaired of ever paying off our debt from the Faithfulness conferences. But you helped rescue us, and after some lean winters we were able to pick ourselves up, pay off the debt, and march forward.

This year's 20th anniversary celebration has made us look back and see God's guiding hand. We have survived undeserved opposition, censure by Church authorities, the death of some of our most-needed leaders, and time's inevitable thinning out of our membership. But we are still alive and kicking as we work to alert United Church members to the church's apparent determination to rob us of our dearest traditions and the strong arm of orthodoxy. You can be justly proud that it is *your* steady support that keeps us going.

Now more than ever we need donations from all of you reading Concern at this moment. If every reader would send us even \$25 it would make a great difference to what we can accomplish. Will you help? Please pray for us as we try to arrange a meeting with the Moderator and General Secretary, and as we set up our new Website. Never forget: you are our hope for turning our plans into reality. Thank you, and may God bless and keep you all.