

CONCERN

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A CHURCH IN DEFAULT

By Rev. Dr. Allen Churchill

Our denomination membership is in radical decline to less than half since 1965. Attendance at worship is down to 200,000, and the youth are staying away in droves.

Clergy are losing respect for the historically orthodox Jesus. This began to be obvious from the studies of Prof. Reg Bibley some twenty years ago. In January 2005, *le Observer* (pg11) reported reasons for ignoring Jesus "and including televangelists' appropriation of His name; a move away from past use of Jesus' name in an imperialistic way; a greater freedom in speaking about the Spirit or God; a fear of being judged when talking about Jesus; the fact that Jesus has been over-analyzed; that ministers are ashamed to use the name of Jesus; that there isn't agreement on who Jesus is, and that many of the people in paid accountable ministry are in spiritual crisis and don't know Jesus."

Clergy have lost their belief in the necessity of atonement for sin through the cross.

Some professors in some theological colleges in the 1980's reduced marks for work done by orthodox or evangelical students. This was brought to light and

stopped when complaints were raised. One theological college discouraged orthodox or evangelical students from applying for taking courses.

Some moderators have described our church in different but telling ways. One stated that we are in "free fall". Another, that we are "dying". Another that many ministers confess not knowing what to preach, or how to apply the presence and power of Jesus in times of personal depression. Unfortunately, no one has addressed the cause. Without an accurate diagnosis, a cure cannot be prescribed.

The recent attempt to engage in evangelism has not been overly successful. The reason would seem to be a failure to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, the need for a dynamic doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the exercise of effective prayer, and an intimacy with our heavenly Father.

In preparation for the 40th General Council, the document "Called to be Church" has attempted to consider the vision and purpose of our church. This is a laudable call embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. What is less than helpful in this document is the emphasis on "story", especially when referring to the Bible as "a sacred book of stories" (p.4). The Bible itself is adamant that its contents are based on eyewitness testimony (Luke 1:1-4; 1 John 1:1-4; 2 Peter 1:16). To deny this is to ignore the history of the people of God, the history of Jesus of Nazareth, and the history of the early church.



These are substantive histories, especially when taken together. To deny this is to ignore also the otherness of the Holy Spirit, who takes us beyond "story" to a radical experience of faith seeded by the Three in One who takes us into a deeper encounter including an historical one.

If the category of "story" is overemphasized in this document, then it is not surprising to read "we find its messages most powerful when it is not read literally..."(p.4). But if the gospel is incarnational as the Bible claims in nearly every book, then not to read it literally in an historical sense is for us to control the text. We then make ourselves greater than the Bible, and make the Bible to mean what we want it to mean.

What do the writers of the document mean when they also say "we recognize that the Word of God is larger than the Bible?" What does "larger" mean there? There are three aspects to the Word of God: the

incarnate Word, the written Word, and the proclaimed Word (Acts 8:35). These are not in competition with each other, but are complementary. They work together co-operatively. They interconnect. One cannot function without the other. This is the richest understanding of the Word of God we can have.

The proposal (No. 1) to declare the Twenty Articles of the Basis of Union as only an historical document should be changed to reaffirm the authority of the Twenty Articles as the historical, theological, and legal foundation of the worship, life, and work of the United Church of Canada. Since the issue is of extreme importance to the future of our church, the Pastoral Charges should vote on any remit held. Moreover it should be noted that the proposal (No. 6) dealing with discrimination includes every group except non-believers and traditional or orthodox believers! The Lord has a wonderful sense of humour, much needed in these challenging days!

Who Speaks for the Church

By Rev. Dr. J. Ralph Watson

Who speaks for the Church? The individual member of the congregation? The Presbytery or Conference? Or is it the General Council? "Who speaks for the Church?" "Who speaks for the Church?" Is a question heard more and more often and more and more loudly in our Church.



It is not, however, a new question for the Church or for those in the Reformed and Protestant traditions. It was, in fact, a lively question in the Reformation, and one frequently raised during the long history of the church in Scotland.

In Scotland, this question often brought with it acrimonious debate, turbulent reactions, and radical change. "Who speaks for the Church?" was at the heart of the controversy with House of Stuart and their ambition to rule and govern not only the state but the Church as well.

It was the same question in the bitter struggle between Episcopacy and Presbytery as to who should govern and speak for the Church. While these struggles and those which followed in succeeding centuries revolved around theological and doctrinal issues, always present and underlying the debate was the basic question, "Who speaks for the Church?"

Ebenezer Erskine and his followers seceded from the Church of Scotland to form the Associate Presbytery and Thoma Chalmers led half of the ministers, hundreds of elders, and thousands of members out of the Church to establish the Free Church in the Great Disruption of 1843. These secessions involved theological debate as to the congregation's role in the Body of Christ, and in particular its right to call its own minister rather than having one imposed on it by the General Assembly.

Over and over again the General Assembly seemed "to develop a life of its own", and its will did not always reflect the will of the people. Eventually the church adopted the Barrier Act, which prevented the General Assembly from imposing any article of doctrine of polity until a majority of Presbyteries had given their approval. Even the Barrier Act, however, was not able to remove the gulf between the people of the Church and the Assembly. An old highland minister expressed the feeling when, at a service of public worship on Assembly Sunday, he prayed for the whole Church, and for "all those meeting in the General Assembly down there in Edinburgh that they may do as little harm as possible to Your Kirk in Scotland."

"Who speaks for the church?" is a question very much alive today among members of our Church across the country. There is a widespread feeling that issues are decided without their involvement.

Signs and sounds of unrest are now evident everywhere. Mission and Service Fund giving goes down, Observer subscriptions drop, loud cries of protest go up on any number of issues, but little if anything changes. There is a rising tide of anger in the Church against the General Council and those who are perceived as thrusting unacceptable decisions on the church.

There is much talk lately of "power" in the Church, that the United Church is not a democracy but a conciliar church – as though the two are or should be mutually exclusive. We are however not living in the Middle Ages under tyrannical monarchy or a

monolithic church, but in the 20th century in democratic country and a free society.

Understandably those who are elected or selected to represent others can become less and less representative the longer they hold their positions, the more knowledge they acquire, and the higher they go in the organization structure. Under this kind of scenario the General Council and other working at this level can "take on a life of their own", quite separate from the views and wishes of ordinary members in the pews.

This separation has occurred in our day, notwithstanding the declaration of Project Ministry, affirmed by the 28th General Council [1980], that "it is a members of the People of God, as members of Christ's body – that all Christians share in His ministry. The Church as a whole, and every member of the church is called to participate in this ministry."

Is it possible that a church that struggles so hard to identify itself with justice for the peasants of the Third World does not hear the voice of the common people among its own members?

Ralph Watson was Secretary of Montreal Presbytery for 28 years. From the beginning of our Church's troubles he has been a strong supporter of COC and therefore gives us great pleasure to reprint his article, which is still timely 22 years after it appeared in the Observer the same year COC was born!

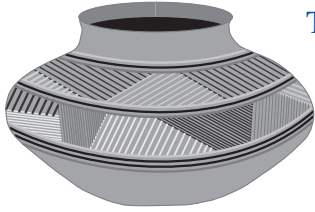
Trusting

When obstacles and trials seem like prison walls to be,
I do the little I can do and leave the rest to Thee.
And when there seems no chance, no change,
From grief can set me free,
Hope finds its strength in helplessness,
And calmly waits for Thee.

*-submitted by a dear COC member
whose waiting now is over.*

The Potter's House

By Rev. Dr. William McDowell



The prophet Jeremiah went down to the potter's house and took notice of how the potter was working at his wheel. There he received a revelation to be addressed to the people Israel. That the United Church's 40th General Council has chosen this theme, "Sown to the Potter's House" (Jeremiah 18)¹ is a sign of hope and encouragement. Could it be that the revelation given to Jeremiah holds a particular message for our United Church as this "crossroads Council" faces the "tough new realities of declining membership and eroding finances"? Look carefully at the passage Jeremiah 18:1-12.

As Jeremiah pondered the meaning of the master craftsman trying to shape a useful vessel, he caught an insight, "a classic illustration of divine sovereignty in relation to human freedom", a picture of the sovereign God as a free Person over us humans who are likewise free persons.² **Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.** Here also is a picture of God who has in mind a purpose and design. The fathers of the United Church believed that "the eternal, wise, holy and loving purpose of God so embraces all events that... in His providence He makes all things work together in the fulfillment of His sovereign design and the manifestation of His glory."³ Jeremiah's picture of God as the potter who has an unfolding purpose is a revelation which permeates the entire Judeo-Christian understanding of the Bible. In the Letter to the Ephesians God's purpose is made more explicit as the ultimate design for the redemption of the world, **a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things in earth. In Christ we have also received an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will** (Eph 1:10 11).

How do we of the United Church of Canada fit into God's purpose to redeem the whole world? Will the commissioners to General Council underline for us all these basic tenets of our faith?

As Jeremiah watched the potter working at his wheel, what seized his attention was also a picture of God's patience and persistence. The vessel the potter was trying to shape and mould was **marred, so he made it again.** Was it a pebble, a bit of stubborn, rigid, unyielding clay? Jeremiah noticed that the potter did not discard the stubborn clay, but crashed it down to make it soft and malleable. Then using the same clay, the potter **reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to him.**

In keeping with this ultimate design and purpose, God does not cast his people aside. Rather, God can take us with our "selfishness, cowardice, apathy... our brokenness in human life and community"⁴ and remould, re-fashion, re-create us as a renewed church. God makes things new (Jer 31:22; Is 65:17; Rev 21:5). **If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new** (2 Cor 5:17).

Can we match the vision God has in mind for the United Church? How can we recognize it? One key to recognizing God's will may be in Paul's letter to the Romans. In response to the gospel we are not to allow the world to press us into its mould; we are to **be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect** (Rom 12:2).

Transformed by the renewing of the mind! Our God is in business to transform individuals, churches, nations and situations in order to make vessels fit for the Master's use.

God's message through Jeremiah is a call to repent – **Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings** (Jer 18:11).

Jewish teaching on repentance is one of the ideas unifying both OT and NT. Repentance as Jeremiah understood is a conscious turning toward God in such a way that we might live obediently and righteously.⁵ Jesus' basic message was to repent: **The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news** (Mk 1:15). Our human response to God's message is consciously, deliberately to turn toward God and seek his direction, to renew our minds and be open to discern what God wants us to be and do. By the call to repentance both as a church and as individuals we face a choice. Will we hear or refuse to hear? **Will we follow our own plans, and will each of us act according to the stubbornness of our evil will?**

"God forgives, and calls all of us to confess our fears and failings with honesty and humility. God reconciles, and calls us to repent the part we have played in damaging our world, ourselves, and each other. God transforms...."⁶

Could it be that God the Potter has a design and will to re-mould the United Church to make us more effective in the decades ahead? Is the call to this

"crossroads Council" for all of us, every person with any connection to the United Church, to renew our commitment to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith, **that the world may believe** (John 17:21)?

*Thou has given us little power to mould things to our own desire; therefore use Thine own omnipotence to bring Thy desires to pass within us.*⁷

*Thou art the potter; we are the clay. Mould us and make us after Thy will..... Hold o'er our being absolute sway? Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see Christ only, always, living in us!*⁸

¹ *The United Church Observer*, July/August, 27.

² *Interpreter's Bible*, 5, 960, 784.

³ THE BASIS OF UNION, Article III. *Of the Divine Purpose*.

⁴ *A Song of Faith*.

⁵ *Interpreter's Bible*, 5, 786.

⁶ *A Song of Faith*.

⁷ John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer*, 20th day morning, adapted.

⁸ Hymn. Have Thine Own Way, Lord!" adapted.

United Church Justice: Still Just a Mirage?

The following article was prepared for Commissioners of the 88th General Council (2003). Over the past six years the process has done no more than grind its way through the examination for discovery process, a requirement before the civil trial. Impatient with the pace, Ted Wigglesworth's lawyer has eventually suggested mediation as a means of quicker resolution. He recommended someone he considered sure to be even-handed in the matter, but recently counsel for the Church expressed concern with that nominee, and named three possible alternatives. Ted's lawyer considers there is a reasonable chance of bias in the case of all three, and has put forward further names. That is where the matter now rests. It has been a long twelve years.

Justice issues have always been a major preoccupation for the United Church. But that truth is hard to reconcile with some of the Church's own internal practices in recent years – for example in its treatment of certain members of its clergy.

A prime case here is that of the Rev. Ted Wigglesworth. His removal from his Pastoral Charge in 1997 and subsequent placement on the

Discontinued Service List (that is, he was dismissed from the UCC clergy) has been argued through every level of the Church and now awaits a hearing in the Court of Queen's Bench in Alberta. At the time of his removal from his Pastoral Charge Ted was Chairman of the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations, a renewal group within the United Church.

The core concern in this particular case is that while the Manual describes very precisely the procedures to be followed when a pastoral relationship is terminated, Coronation Presbytery did not follow them. Neither the Pastoral Charge nor the minister asked for a change in the Pastoral Relationship, and a congregational meeting called by Presbytery itself voted by two-thirds majority against a change in the Pastoral Relationship. On January 22, 1997, the Presbytery dissolved it anyway – on one day's notice, with no warning, and offering no reason.

Subsequently, and surprisingly, a representative of Alberta and Northwest Conference met with Ted to tell him he was not allowed to accept another call until at least September 1997. (the ban was subsequently extended indefinitely.) No hearing had been held, and once again no reasons were provided.

However Ted, admitting that no one is perfect, complied with the direction that he undergo some assessment and retraining. He completed each requirement without difficulty and received glowing comments. But after a year and a half the requirements multiplied, so that the process looked more and more like an arbitrary means of preventing his return to active ministry. This time he refused to continue, appealing to the Conference that he was in effect being harassed. This refusal to continue with the process led to his being placed on the Discontinued Service List. And subsequent appeals within the Church culminating with one before a Panel at the 37th General Council (in 2000), all failed.

The result? For twelve years now this minister has been unable to follow God's call into ministry.

How reasonable and fair has all this been? Given just cause, Presbyteries do have the right to discipline Pastoral Charges and ministers. But the Basis of Union, the Manual and the laws of Canada insist on due process, including the right to know what is at issue as well as the opportunity to rebut allegations. It is almost unbelievable that this view has apparently now been accepted, with the Alberta Conference's ruling in favour of its Presbytery including this statement: "A Presbytery may act on the belief that a certain minister should not continue to serve a certain pastoral charge without laying a charge or alleging misconduct or any other matter which would subject that minister to discipline." (emphasis added)

Apparently this view has now been accepted by every level of Church courts. Fundamental issues of justice are at stake here – critical issues for every Pastoral Charge and minister. The grassroots church needs to understand that (a) the Church's own procedures must always be followed carefully, and that (b) even then, without fairness of spirit, process is of itself no guarantee of just treatment.

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