

CONCERN

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This is the second special article which was distributed to General Council last August. The third will be printed in our June Concern.

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?" 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 the 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 Thomas 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 or 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.

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Who Speaks for the Church *cont'd from page 1*

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 organizational structure. Under this kind of scenario the General Council and others 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 as 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. It 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!

The Great Crossroads

The United Church will be celebrating its 85th anniversary on June 10th, and plans are afoot for this historic event.

What should we do about it? Should we pray for a leadership committed to our denomination's founding document: The Basis of Union of 1925? Or should we emphasize our denomination's rapid decline after 1988 under the leadership of the last eight Moderators? There are many – and the Community of

Concern has always been among them – who are calling for the United Church once again to be **“a Christ-centered, healthy, growing family of believers who proclaim the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord, both in word and in deed.”**

On June 10th we stand once again at a great crossroads. Let us pray that our Church's leaders will be led by the Holy Spirit.



Oops! Jim has told us we made a number of errors in our brief account of his ministry. The following incorporates his own information.

James Wilson was born in England and served in the British army for three years. Ordained in 1949, he ministered in South Africa and Rhodesia before going to Ontario in 1955. He joined the United Church in 1969, serving in Burnaby, Beaconsfield and Narramata, B.C. after one year at Simon Fraser University and three years at

Union College. His 9-year ministry in Nelson B.C. had to be terminated in 1986 when he suffered two strokes, but he remained there for 26 years before retiring to Herbert, Saskatchewan. Now it is the people of Alberta who are very fortunate to have Jim as their Outreach Correspondent.

Going Backwards for 20 Years: United Church Membership Loss (1988 - 2008)

1988 - 1990.....	34,536
(Moderator: Sang Chul Lee)	
1990 - 1992.....	43,648
(Moderator: Walter Farquharson)	
1992 - 1994.....	31,513
(Moderator: Stan McKay)	
1994 - 1997.....	41,018
(Moderator: Marion Best)	
1997 - 2000.....	44,646
(Moderator: Bill Phipps)	
2000 - 2003.....	44,171
(Moderator: Marion Parady)	
2003-2006.....	51,564
(Moderator: Peter Short)	
2006 - 2009.....	47,751
(Moderator: David Guiliano)	
<hr style="border: 1px solid black;"/> TOTAL.....	<hr style="border: 1px solid black;"/> 338,829

These figures show what has happened to our United Church since 1988. In 20 years (and under only eight moderators) the Church has lost 338,829 members! Why this immense loss took place and how nothing has so far been able to stop it will probably be the subject of more than one doctoral thesis as Protestant scholars wake up to what is happening.

Of course other Protestant churches in Canada have been similarly afflicted, as have ones in the United States and parts of Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America. We seem fated to go through mainline Protestant losses on a hitherto unimaginable scale.

Can we celebrate the 85th Anniversary of the United Church’s founding this coming June without praying for some resurrection miracle? After all we’ve been going backwards steadily for 20 years.

In 1998 the American Professor of History, Thomas Reeves, wrote a book entitled The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity. Here is what he said on page 175:

The “submission of liberal Protestantism to a secular gospel rests upon a failure to accept the essentials of the Christian faith. The first and most critical step in halting the slide of the mainline churches is the restoration of their commitment to orthodox theology. Everything else depends on that.”

Keeping the Ship on Course

At last we can walk on our streets here without boots, and our spirits rise as the days lengthen. We were also lifted up by this note from a loyal member: *“I want to say how grateful I am for each of you who by your faithful, constant dedication, work, and commitment have managed to keep our ship on course.”*



my bulletin I read every word that our dear deceased friend had chosen for it. One hymn really spoke to me: *“Light of the anxious heart, Jesus, thou dost appear, To bid the gloom of guilt depart, and shed Thy sweetness here.”*

Many of us are encouraged by COC’s hard work to keep our Church strengthened in orthodoxy as we try to comfort and quiet our “Anxious hearts”. We will also be heartened by the Annual Meeting as we mingle with old friends and

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Keeping the Ship Afloat *cont'd from page 3*

listen to Gervis Black's address. But our meeting entails travel and accommodation for our Board members, the hiring of a bus to bring those who otherwise couldn't come, the luncheon, the gratuities – it's a long list.

How can you help? By the donations which many of you faithfully send. Could you increase yours this spring? We would be most grateful. You may be sure that for this special event your money will be well spent!

Don't miss this one! Come one, come all to *Our 22nd Annual Meeting*

Saturday, April 24, 2010

10 am to 3 pm at

Ryerson United Church

842 Main St. East, Hamilton

(plenty of free parking in the adjacent schoolyard)

SPECIAL SPEAKER:

Rev. Dr. Gervis Black

Morning Session

- 1) Worship Service
- 2) Business Meeting

LUNCH

Please phone 1-800-465-7186
to let our office plan for this.

Afternoon Session

- 1) Songs of Praise
- 2) Words of Inspiration
by Rev. Dr. Gervis Black

Gervis Black is the 7th generation in a long line of preachers. He was the Senior Minister at Metropolitan United Church in London – the largest United Church in Canada – from 1988 to 1994. His talents attracted 1,500 people to Metropolitan each Sunday, and thousands more were reached by him on national TV. He is still one of Canada's most inspiring speakers.

Many of you will remember – and took part in – the triumphal march Gervis led from his church to the 19th General Council meeting at the University of Western Ontario in August 1990.

Please note: We're prepared to rent a bus originating in London and possible stopping at other places west of Hamilton, all at no expense to you. We must, however, know how many of you will avail yourselves of this round trip. Please phone us at **905-318-9244** well ahead of the meeting.

