

Backgrounder on : A Song of Faith

PREAMBLE

This statement of faith seeks to provide a verbal picture of what The United Church of Canada understands its faith to be in its current historical, political, social, and theological context at the beginning of the 21st century. It is also a means of ongoing reflection and an invitation for the church to live out its convictions in relation to the world in which we live.

The church's faith is grounded in truths that are timeless. These truths, however, must be embraced anew by Christians of each generation and stated "in terms of the thoughts of their own age and with the emphasis their age needs" (Statement of Faith, 1940).

This is not the first time the United Church has formally expressed its collective faith. In the Basis of Union (1925), in the Statement of Faith (1940), and in A New Creed (1968), the United Church stated its faith in words appropriate to its time. This current statement of faith is offered within that tradition, and in response to the request of the 37th General Council (2000) for a "timely and contextual statement of faith" that especially engages "the church in conversation on the nature of the church (ecclesiology), ministry and the sacraments."

This statement of faith attempts to reflect the spirit of The United Church of Canada and to respond to various defining elements in our social, political, and historical context, including the place of the church in society, the cultural and intellectual setting in which we find ourselves, the meaning of "truth," the impact of the market economy on our daily lives, and the growing issue of the meaning of "security." These contextual elements are further explored in the appendices to this document.

This is not a statement for all time but for *our* time. In as much as the Spirit keeps faith with us, we can express our understanding of the Holy with confidence. And in as much as the Spirit is vast and wild, we recognize that our understanding of the Holy is always partial and limited. Nonetheless we have faith, and this statement collects the meaning of our song.

On the Purpose and Status of the Statement of Faith

INTENDED AUDIENCE

It may be worth asking, "Who is this statement of faith for?" Knowing *who* it is for may provide a clearer sense of *what* it is for. The short answer is that it's written for The United Church of Canada—its members, congregations, and courts—as a means to help the church clarify and discuss its beliefs. Of course, it may very well be read with interest by individuals and bodies outside the United Church, and as such it serves more than one purpose.

Our ecumenical partners will find areas of common ground. They will find an affirmation of the Holy Trinity, of scripture as a source of revelation, and of the significance of Jesus Christ in our communal life. They may also find places where the interpretation or emphasis placed on particular aspects of the Christian tradition differs from theirs. We hope they will see in this document an invitation to ongoing dialogue.

Likewise, members of non-Christian faith communities may find an openness to conversation and cooperation. The statement of faith makes an explicit claim that the Spirit is active in *all* peoples, not merely in those who call themselves Christian, and that the church is challenged to recognize and celebrate the holy in all its expressions, both familiar and foreign.

Those who come to this statement of faith from no faith community in particular will find some insight into the essential beliefs of the Christian tradition, and into The United Church of Canada's particular way of interpreting and living out those beliefs. There may be times in the statement of faith when the concepts or terminology used seem unfamiliar to an individual with no background in religious

matters; if the document had been composed specifically as a primer in the faith, it would have been written quite differently. Nonetheless, such a reader will hopefully discover an adequate summary of the assumptions and values that ground the church.

Those who work for justice in our society and in the global context will find in this statement an expression of common goals and a desire for solidarity. The statement of faith names human diversity as a blessing and identifies as sinful those forces that threaten, oppress, and exploit. While it is an expression of faith and not a policy statement, it does name religious and ethnic bigotry, the concentration of wealth at the expense of the vulnerable, complicity with empires of domination, and the harming of the earth as areas of dire concern.

Those in the church and outside of it who have experienced hurt at the hands of the institution, or who continue to struggle with the role the church has played in historical injustices, will find in the statement of faith an acknowledgement that the church often failed to live up to its vision and a desire to repent, to reorient itself, and to work for the healing and reconciliation of all.

This statement of faith, clearly, will be different things to different people.

But first and foremost it is a document for the church itself. It is intended as a means by which the church can express its beliefs to itself and to the world, and a tool to help the church's members reflect on their individual and collective faith. It is more *descriptive* than *prescriptive*, which is to say it does not claim to tell the church what it *should* believe so much as it attempts to put forward in an orderly and evocative way what the church *seems* to believe, based on its actions, its discourse, and its relationship to the Christian tradition in general and its own history in particular.

The expression of a denomination's collective faith is not necessarily identical to the particular faith expressions of its individual members. The United Church has a long tradition of spiritual freedom, and this statement of faith should not be seen in any way as a condition of membership in The United Church of Canada. There is a wide theological spectrum in the United Church and a diversity of interpretations and understandings. This statement of faith seeks to be something of a metaphorical "tent," encompassing the many divergent perspectives in the denomination. At times the "tent" can get stretched quite tightly; the section in Appendix D on United Church identity explores this point further. Members of the church are encouraged to find their own particular place in the theological tent, and are challenged to recognize the value of their tent-mates' faith even when expressions and emphases differ. If this statement of faith facilitates greater understanding among members of the church, it will have achieved something quite remarkable.

In addition to being a tool for reflection, it is hoped that this statement of faith will provide theological grounding and support to the church's work in the world—its various congregational and social ministries, its political witness, and its global partnership work. The statement may also prove useful in study groups and confirmation classes, again as an entry into a discussion of the relationship between personal faith and communal faith. Parts of this statement of faith may also find their way into the church's worship life, although the statement was not intended to serve the same sort of liturgical function as A New Creed.

In the end, the practical purpose of this document will have to be determined not by the intentions of the committee charged with drafting it but by the use it ultimately finds in the life and work of the church.

STATUS

The status of this statement of faith as a document of the church will be determined formally by the General Council and practically by its usage in the church. It is up to the church to say what this statement, as it stands, *is*. The drafters of the statement, however, offer some suggestions and clarifications as to what it is *not*.

This statement is not intended to be in any way a replacement of the beloved New Creed, which is used in congregations across Canada. A New Creed (adopted in 1968) is a concise and usefully open-ended creedal statement for use, primarily, in liturgical settings. And people in the United Church *love* it.

This current statement of faith is obviously longer and goes into more detail about the church's understanding of itself and its faith convictions. It does not aspire to the same liturgical standing as A New Creed.

This statement does not seek to replace the Twenty Articles of Faith included in the United Church's 1925 Basis of Union. The Twenty Articles have historical significance for the church, being an expression of the theological agreement negotiated among the founding denominations, which allowed significantly different bodies (the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist denominations and the Local Union Churches) to come together as one united church.

Nor does the statement seek to replace the United Church's 1940 Statement of Faith. Each statement—the Twenty Articles of Faith (1925), the Statement of Faith (1940), A New Creed (1968), and this current document—has its own particular character, use, and place in the church's life. Each speaks to its time and context in its own way.

It will be up to the church to determine what place this document will have in relation to these other expressions of the church's shared faith, and whether all of these statements can stand comfortably side by side.

On the Language and Form of the Statement of Faith

NAMING THE HOLY

This statement of faith maintains the United Church's custom of using inclusive language. This is not simply a matter of sensitivity or "political correctness"; it is a matter of accuracy. The term "man" is no longer common usage when referring to all of humanity, and the generic pronoun "he" is likewise not reflective of both men and women. The use of exclusively male language and metaphors to refer to God distorts our understanding of a divine being who transcends the human categories of gender.

The statement employs and honours the traditional image of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), but also offers other images, such as Mother, Friend, Comforter, Source of Life, Living Word, Bond of Love. Words are a significant means of understanding and relating to the Holy, and the statement of faith recognizes the adequacy of *all* images or metaphors that speak faithfully of "the One on whom our hearts rely." However, the first designation of God in the statement of faith, that of Holy Mystery, serves as a reminder that all subsequent attempts to name the Divine are simply that—*attempts* to describe a reality that is always greater than human language can encompass.

At times the use of inclusive language demands a certain amount of "verbal gymnastics" or awkwardness of phrasing, and perhaps this is not a bad thing. It reminds us that the object of worship is ultimately God and not our *images* of God.

WE SING

In its layout and language, the statement of faith has some of the look and feel of poetry. Its primary intentions, however, are not artistic; it has no aspirations of rivalling William Blake, Christina Rossetti, Leonard Cohen, or Jalal ad-Din Rumi. The drafters of the statement of faith intentionally opted for a form and a tone that would be more evocative than definitive. In response to the diversity in the church, the pluralism in society, and the "untameable" nature of the Holy, they sought an expression that would invite dialogue—a conversation-starter rather than a conversation-ender. The statement of faith, with its leanings toward the lyrical, seeks to be something of a love song, an offering up of those values, ideas, and truths that the United Church holds close to its heart. It is a song that is open to the possibility of other songs, in the hope that others might add their own counter-melodies, descants, and harmonies.

Of course, poetry is not everyone's preferred form. Some may find the layout and the language of the statement hard to read and will wish for a more simple, straightforward, and unambiguous statement of doctrine. Nevertheless, the drafters deem this form and language most appropriate for the statement of faith as a way of negotiating the varying perspectives to be accommodated and as a way of expressing truths that could not be stated in simple straightforward terms without distortion.

TERMINOLOGY

In many places the statement of faith avoids using certain stock phrases that have become conventional in the Christian tradition. This is done in an effort to make the statement more accessible to those not grounded in traditional Christian language. It is also done in the awareness that, given the theological diversity in the United Church, one group might view a certain term or phrase as a standard around which to rally, while another group might view the same term or phrase as a “red flag.” The drafters of this statement encourage all members of the church, regardless of their place in the theological spectrum, to look beyond conventional phraseology to the shared meanings that underlie and give rise to the varied expressions of faith that find currency in the United Church.

In other places traditional theological terms and concepts, such as “sin,” “repentance,” “witness,” and “grace,” have been maintained because they offer a unique or challenging truth for our time and context. Occasionally the statement of faith offers an alternate interpretation of theological terms that

are part of common usage in our society but that the United Church understands and uses in its own particular way.

In all its work, the drafters of the statement of faith have attempted to balance the need for widespread accessibility with the need for accuracy and the desire to encourage increased theological literacy, reflection, and conversation.

On the Context of the Statement of Faith

The Theology and Faith Committee was instructed by the United Church’s General Council to draft a faith statement that would be “timely and contextual”—in other words, a statement that would arise from and speak to the here and now, the world in which we live. Certain aspects of the church’s current social, political, and historical context stood out as significant as the drafters of the statement of faith went about their work. These contextual elements influenced both the content and the form of the statement.

THE HUNGER FOR RELATIONSHIP

Many of the traditional connections that once bound people to one another in Canadian society have eroded. Church membership, at least in mainline denominations, and political party affiliation have declined. Many people do not know their neighbours. We have technologies that allow instant communication across great distances but offer, at best, “virtual” community. Increasingly relationships are governed by convenience and utility. Yet there is a hunger for connection, and while some find themselves lost in alienation and estrangement, others lose themselves in blind, uncritical allegiance to whichever group, gang, cult, or movement offers the sensation of belonging.

The theme of “relationship” runs throughout the statement of faith. God’s desire for relationship is cited as the source of creation and the nature of the Holy Trinity. The statement of faith holds up Jesus’ challenging ethic of love as central to Christian faith. And it uses words such as “partnership,” “solidarity,” “community,” and the quest for “right relationship” to talk about the gifts of the Spirit and tasks of the church.

THE DE-CENTRED CHURCH

The church in Canada and in much of Western society has been moved from the public to the private sphere. No longer able to act on assumptions of power and influence, the church finds itself situated on the *edges* rather than at the centre. No longer enjoying the political and cultural influence it once had, the church worries about how to make a difference in the larger society. It may even think back with nostalgia on the era of Christendom when it held a position of privilege. But, separated as it now is from the centre of power, the United Church has also become increasingly aware of its complicity with historic oppressions and abuses (for example, in its relationship with First Nations peoples). The shift to the margins produces worry but also provides the opportunity to embrace faithful solidarity with the

marginalized and to situate our theology and world view away from the centre of power.

The statement of faith acknowledges that the church has “not always lived up to its vision” and challenges it “to live by grace rather than entitlement.” It calls the church to a mission of solidarity, standing with the oppressed, offering resistance to “forces that exploit and marginalize.” And it affirms that the Spirit is active not only in Christian community but also “in the world.”

THE QUESTION OF “TRUTH”

The context in which this statement is written is one in which the modern notions of universal experience and overarching truth are crumbling. People struggle for some elusive “common ground,” yearn for a “collective identity.” Because no statement will provide such firm ground and no embrace of it will secure a sense of belonging, the question of a “uniting truth” opens before us in a new way. We are in a position to wrestle deeply with the theological conviction that in Christ we have been made one.

In a multicultural society, in a multifaith world, in a Christian community composed of varying theological perspectives, it is often difficult to know what “truth” means. Some in our world make exclusive claims to absolute truth and find in these claims authorization to do harm; others regard all truth as relative and consequently are complacent in the face of harm. Over the years the United Church has become increasingly able to embrace diversity while still affirming a sense of distinctive significance that unites us as a faith community. While believing that its faith is grounded in truth, the church strives to understand that its truth need not deny the truths of others.

The statement of faith begins by acknowledging God as “Mystery,” which throws into question any human claims to absolute truth. Recognizing that the Spirit challenges us to celebrate the Holy “not only in what is familiar, but also in that which seems foreign,” the church does well to respect “other ways that speak faithfully of the One on whom our hearts rely.” (See also the section on terminology in Appendix B.)

THE MARKET ECONOMY

We live in a culture in which economics (commerce, commodities, consumption) governs what we count as important. The economic world view is so pervasive that we are barely aware of its impact on our relationships, values, identities, and understanding of church. Many find their spiritual hunger co-opted by the culture of consumption. The dominant mindset commodifies the world, reducing it to objects merely to be manipulated and controlled. Many find themselves feeling impoverished in a society of affluence, leaving them indifferent to real poverty. In a world increasingly dedicated to unrestrained competition, all social interactions, values, and goals are subordinated to economic growth and capital accumulation. In contrast to this economy of exploitation, the prophetic voice of faith offers a vision of an economy of promise based on the model of a household. In such an economy the inhabitants appreciate that they share a world that can become a home only if they are related by way of interdependence with one another and with their special environment.

The statement of faith speaks of “gifts shared” in contrast to the “concentration of wealth and power without regard for the needs of all.” It speaks of creaturely inter-dependence in contrast to the “delusion of unchecked progress and limitless growth.” It speaks of “right relationship” and “resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize” in contrast to “complicity with empires and systems of domination.”

THE CLIMATE OF TERROR

We live in a world of threats, both real and manufactured. Some fear for their identities, values, security, or ability to survive. There are different ways of responding to fear: Some attack the “other,” whom they see as a threat; some build walls to keep the threats out; some divert precious resources to military buildup; some search for powerful alliances. At the same time, prophetic individuals and communities of faith risk dialogue and reconciliation, living with threat as a place where repentance and new vision are beckoned.

The statement of faith recognizes “all people as kin,” calling on the church with a vision of

“human dignity defended,” and so to offer “fierce love in the face of violence” and to “work with God for the healing of the world, that all might have abundant life.” The story of Jesus, crucified and risen, is a reminder that death does not have the last word and that violence, fear, war, and hatred cannot “overcome or undermine the love of God.”

OUR HOME, THE EARTH

Society has become increasingly aware of the fragility of our natural environment and of the potential that human civilization has for upsetting the balance. The idea of the “sacred earth” and the “good creation,” long a part of tribal and of religious tradition, has re-emerged as a challenge to the doctrine of conquest and exploitation that has often characterized our culture’s relationship to the earth.

The statement of faith describes creation, in all its diversity, complexity, and interdependence, as a reflection of the divine Creator. It emphasizes the connection of all creatures, and identifies humans, not as lords and masters of the earth, but as “one strand in the web of life.” It names the “mending of creation” as part of God’s plan and the work of the church.

On the Identity of the United Church

as Reflected in the Statement of Faith

WHO ARE “WE”?

Much of the statement of faith is written in the first person plural, which naturally raises the question, Who is the “we” who is talking? Sometimes the “we” is a reference to the entire human race (e.g., “Nothing separates us from the love of God.”) Occasionally it indicates the larger Christian community (“We find God made known in Jesus of Nazareth.”) But for the most part the “we” of this statement of faith is we, The United Church of Canada.

Which raises another question: How does one know, let alone express, the faith of a collective body like the United Church? Who has the authority to say what the denomination as a whole believes, and what is the relationship between such a statement of belief and the faith expressions of the denomination’s individual members?

In order for a statement of faith such as this one to be embraced by the members of the United Church, it must be experienced as in some way reflecting the church’s distinctive spirit and values. Such a sense of the church’s “spirit” is, of course, a subjective perception, based on one’s personal experiences, relationships, and associations with the church. One person’s sense of “who the church is” may be significantly different from another person’s, which, as you can imagine, makes the creation of a statement expressing the church’s communal and shared truths somewhat tricky, especially given the diversity of perspectives in the church.

As the drafters of the statement went about the work of composing a document that could accurately reflect The United Church of Canada and its living faith, certain working assumptions about the church’s nature and identity came into play. Some of these assumptions could be expressed explicitly from the start; others became apparent only in the process of deciding the content of the statement and in the process of widespread consultation with the church at large.

JUSTICE, INCLUSIVITY, AND SCRIPTURE

Despite the diversity in The United Church of Canada, a few things could be generally agreed on as being significant elements of the United Church’s collective identity, both from within the membership of the church and from those who observe the church externally. Appropriately, these elements are reflected in the statement of faith.

The United Church of Canada is a mainline Protestant Christian denomination, and as such it should not be surprising to find in this document an affirmation of the existence and activity of a compassionate God as well as an expression of the particular significance of the person of Jesus Christ to the faith community. The United Church belongs to the Christian tradition, and therefore shares much

common ground with other Christian denominations.

Some qualities, however, make the United Church distinctive and are significant aspects of its self-identification. One could safely describe the metaphorical “head, heart, and guts” of the United Church’s sense of itself as, respectively: its approach to the interpretation of scripture, its affection for the concept of inclusivity, and its passion for social justice.

The origins of the United Church are closely linked to the Social Gospel movement of the early 20th century, and the church has always seen itself as an advocate for social justice in society and in the world. This can be seen reflected in the statement of faith’s vision of God’s reign as “a commonwealth not of domination but of peace, justice, and reconciliation”; in its naming as sinful those “systemic forms of injustice, violence, and hatred” that threaten human community and the integrity of creation; and in its call to the church to “stand with the oppressed,” offering “resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize.” Over the years the church’s stated commitment to justice has led it to reinterpret its understanding of “mission,” moving from models of charity and conversion toward a model of mutuality, “grounded in partnership and solidarity.”

The United Church sees itself as an “inclusive” church, aspiring to a practice of honouring and acknowledging the value of all people regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, economic class, and so on. This desire for inclusiveness plays out differently in different parts of the church but is nonetheless a significant part of the church’s self-image. The statement of faith reflects this value in its recognition of all people as family and its naming of diversity as a blessing; in its honouring of Jesus as one who crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender; and in its criticism of biblical interpretations that make scripture into a “tool of oppression, exclusion, or hatred.” The value of inclusiveness can also be seen throughout in the statement’s use of inclusive language. (See the section on terminology in Appendix B.)

The United Church, in its use of scripture, exhibits an approach that seeks to take the Bible seriously, but not literally. Biblical study and interpretation in the United Church often take into consideration scripture’s historical context, its literary value and function, the diversity of voices and perspectives being represented, and the voices *not* being represented. The statement of faith recognizes scripture as testaments of “human experiences and cultural assumptions,” but also as a source of revelation, a “faithful witness,” and “our song for the journey.”

TENSIONS

While certain attributes are commonly acknowledged as aspects of the United Church’s collective identity, the process of drafting the statement of faith (and the accompanying process of consultation) has revealed that other elements of its collective identity remain unresolved. This should not be too surprising; no living group or institution has all of its issues settled. Some of the United Church’s unresolved issues are a result of change and growth, the transition from the old to the new. Others come from differences in perspective. The resulting tensions are sometimes creative and dynamic, sometimes divisive and anxiety-producing. The analytical reader may discern hints of some of these unresolved (and possibly unresolvable) tensions reflected in the statement of faith.

Diversity and Unity—The United Church’s affirmation of inclusiveness creates certain problems in establishing a sense of unified identity for the church. The church is increasingly skilled at accommodating a wide spectrum of theological perspectives, liturgical practices, political opinions, cultural values, and social practices, as well as a variety of ethnic backgrounds, regional associations, sexual orientations, and so on. However, there remains a longing for unity, for that which binds the disparate together. But to name what that “common thread” might be always runs the risk of excluding, of creating division, of establishing boundaries. The church’s aversion to “us” and “them” distinctions for fear of excluding anyone makes attempts to establish who exactly “we” are difficult, so the church’s dream of being a “united *and* uniting” church remains in tension. The statement of faith will likely not resolve this tension, but it does seek to engage it.

Progressiveness and Tradition—The United Church is considered by many, inside and out, to be a

“progressive” denomination. It is a church that engages its culture, adapts to its context, and, to a large extent, embraces the intellectual tools of modernity (and post-modernity, and whatever it is that comes after post-modernity). At the same time it strives to stay rooted in the Christian tradition. Sometimes those members of the church who ally themselves with what they see as orthodox values and those who champion an ideal of progressiveness seem to be pulling the church in opposite directions. The statement of faith attempts to negotiate this tension creatively and faithfully.

Global Perspective and Eurocentric World View—The United Church, through its evolving understanding of mission and its sense of inclusiveness, has sought to be intentionally attuned to a variety of voices hitherto unacknowledged: voices coming from women, from people living in poverty, from ethnic minorities, and from brothers and sisters in the global community, especially those in the so-called “Third World.” At the same time, the majority of United Church membership continues to be predominantly white, middle-class, of European descent, and, obviously, North American. While the church moves toward a greater awareness of its global solidarity, it would be dishonest to pretend that its values and perspectives are not influenced by its social location as a historically white, middle-class, Euro-Canadian church. The content of the statement has benefits from many voices, but there are always more voices to be heard.

Individual Freedom and Institutional Authority—The United Church has a long tradition of honouring spiritual freedom. The very existence of this statement of faith raises questions about the relationship between the individual church member (and his or her faith) and the institution (and its expression of collective faith). (See Appendix A on purpose and status.) In a consumer society, in which relationships are increasingly defined by utility and convenience, what does “membership” in a collective body like the church mean? By what authority does the institutional church speak and act on behalf of its members? The question has an impact on the acceptance and use of the statement of faith, as well as on the sense of personal responsibility the individual member might feel for such things as the church’s complicity in running Indian residential schools or for the church’s commitment to social justice.

These tensions are symptomatic of a living church. They can be uncomfortable at times, but they are our tensions, and we live with them.