

Sunday August 12, 2012

Being honest about what we believe

By Jim Taylor

This week, The United Church of Canada is about to end 87 years of hypocrisy.

At its last General Council, held here in Kelowna in 2009, the church decided to re-consider its only official statement of faith, the Twenty Articles enshrined in its constitution when the church was formed in 1925.

Those Articles were described as “the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us” by the founding denominations of The United Church. The Articles had, in fact, been hammered out 14 years earlier by the denominations considering union – the country’s Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches – as a statement acceptable to all three, in 1911.

After the more conservative elements of the Presbyterian Church pulled out of Church Union, though, the Articles represented what the “commonly-held” theology of the founding denominations had been, not what it currently was.

Even in 1925, it was an agreement about the past.

To use an automotive analogy, the Twenty Articles represented the Model T Ford, when the Model A was already on the roads.

An evolving faith

Since that time, the United Church has re-stated its faith three times: in 1940, 1968, and 2006. But these newer statements never officially replaced the original Twenty Articles. According to *The United Church of Canada Act*, passed by the federal government in 1924, the church can only amend its *Basis of Union* through a complicated process called a “remit” – a kind of church-wide referendum

In 2009, General Council recommended that the United Church supplement its Twenty Articles by adding the later statements.

By including additional statements, the United Church would affirm that its faith has been evolving in a modern world. That is a historically legitimate process. The church spent four tumultuous centuries hammering out a series of statements of faith, until Emperor Constantine forced it to adopt a single statement in 325 A.D. Yet even that underwent further modification in 381 A.D.

Some United Church members may still hold the 1925 Articles to be a true expression of their faith. That is their prerogative. I do not. Clinging to the Twenty Articles strikes me like persisting in driving that Model T on a six-lane freeway.

Obsessed with sinfulness

The pervasive theme of 1925 Articles (and of many earlier statements and traditional hymns) is a presumption of human sinfulness. Sin was considered so powerful that no human could resist it. Even God could defeat sin only by becoming a perfectly sinless human, whose sacrificial death paid the price of sin for all the rest of us.

The Twenty Articles conclude that “the finally impenitent shall go away into eternal punishment,” from where not even God can rescue them.

The 1940 *Statement of Faith* expounds a similar theology, though in less archaic language.

Neither the 1968 *New Creed* (and its subsequent amendments) nor the 2006 *Song of Faith* specifically contradicts these earlier statements. But their focus has shifted – from sin to love, from punishment to responsibility. Out of gratitude for the mystery of God’s love for us -- evidenced in Christ, the Spirit, and the Church -- we respond by living as an embodiment of God’s love.

Fortunately, I was never required to affirm the Twenty Articles as the only acceptable faith of my church. Clergy do not enjoy that luxury. To be ordained or commissioned, they must state “essential agreement” with the Twenty Articles.

I know at least one minister who was not willing to make his first official act a lie.

Overwhelming support

The vote in favour of including the newer statements along with the old was overwhelming. For such a sweeping change, the United Church’s constitution, its *Basis of Union*, requires approval by a majority of all pastoral charges – not just a majority of those who bother voting. Those who don’t vote at all (about 25 per cent, this time) are considered negative votes.

Of those who voted on adding the three newer faith statements, about 85 per cent favoured the changes. Only 15 per cent opposed them.

The changes will become official this week when the church’s General Council meeting in Ottawa formally approves them.

Even in 1925, the Twenty Articles did not accurately represent what students were learning in seminaries. Since then, Barth and Bultmann, Tillich and Niebuhr, and more recently Brueggemann and Borg, have further broadened our understandings of Christian faith.

Both my father and my grandfather were ministers of the church. I worked for the church on staff for 13 years, and as a publisher of church-related materials for another 18 years. I spent 60 years volunteering as everything from a Sunday school teacher to a General Council commissioner.

The United Church is my home.

If my church had refused to acknowledge that faith is fluid, not frozen, I think I would have had to leave the church. Now I don’t have to. Hallelujah!

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YOUR TURN

Last week, you may recall, I suggested that Harry Truman’s Inaugural Address in January 1949 had changed the way we assessed nations. Instead of race or religion, the overriding quality was “development.” This had led, I argued, to a distorted view.

Isabel Gibson challenged that assertion. “You mention pollution, lawsuits and crime as 'fruits' of Western-style progress (Crime? Really? Part of the human condition, I'd say), but you don't mention other fruits like low maternal and neonatal death rates; fewer children lost to preventable diseases, both through vaccination and cleaner water. I don't think the only 'benefit' of seeing a large swath of the world as 'developing' is that it changed the basis for our (unjustified) sense of superiority. Has it been all good? Certainly not. Has some good come from it? I'd say so.”

I should note that crime itself doesn't increase a country's GDP – but the efforts to control crime (police, prisons, courts, lawyers, etc.) certainly do.

In a subsequent letter, Isabel expanded on her theme: “The data do show that developed countries have much lower maternal death rates than developing ones. Granted that the USA isn't leading the pack of developed nations, no matter what Harry S would have thunk. Just as 'developing' unfairly lumps a wide variety of realities, so too does 'developed', perhaps. I might choose a Scandinavian country as a model for 'developed', rather than the USA.

“I see increased production as an indispensable part of the effort to reduce hunger, misery and suffering – ‘necessary but not sufficient,’ to borrow a mathematical proof concept. Not production at all costs... but by enabling others to produce more food and more wealth to pay for the other goods and services that do things like bringing down childhood death rates.”

Mary-Margaret Boone picked up on the connection to the bombing of Hiroshima: “I make it a point to share my peace scarf on one of the Sunday's that surrounds August. 6th. It was given to me by the first Japanese student that we hosted, who happened to be from Hiroshima. The mayor of that city addressed the local group of host families and spoke of the need in the world for peace and not acts of revenge. And he spoke of how a city blossomed and was re-vitalized much sooner than expected by the rest of the world. He was also brutally honest about the human loss not just in that generation but in future ones.

“We now host students for the local twinning committee (not every year but when we are able) . The Lindsay/Nayoro student exchange has been happening for over 40 years and was initiated by a United Church minister after being an overseas missionary in Japan. To be immersed in a culture and a country through hosting a student is the educational experience of a lifetime.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
