

REFLECTION



Fairlawn Avenue
United Church

Rev. Dr. Ambury
Stuart

Sunday,
October 19, 2025



THANKS BE TO GOD FOR THE UNITED
CHURCH OF CANADA

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Last week was Thanksgiving Sunday; I spoke about being thankful for Canada, our home and native land, and we sang the national anthem after the sermon. Some of you may have wondered what does “standing on guard for the true north strong and free” have to do with the “Prince of Peace” that we came to worship? I grant that this mix of national politics and religion is unusual, but we live in unusual times right now. Today, I want to convince you that Canada and its United Church have everything to do with one another - they are like two peas in a pod. There is a reason why the Canadian national anthem is also a hymn in Voices United (VU 524). Our United Church is as Canadian as maple syrup, and perhaps the only truly Canadian organization outside the government itself.

The scripture reading for this morning is the same text that was planned to be preached on during the inaugural service for the United Church of Canada on June 10, 1925. Reading from the Gospel of John, Chapter 17, verses, 1,2,6 and 17-23

17 After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, 2 since you have given him authority over all people,[a] to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.

6 ‘I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

20 ‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,[f] so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Jesus’ prayer that all those who believe in him may be one was taken to mean that the union of the separate denominations into a single denomination that was about to happen in that service would be what Jesus wanted to happen for his church: that they may become completely one, “so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23)

The launch of the United Church of Canada 100 years ago was a daring experiment at the time, and the preacher at this service must have been pleased that he had found a scripture where Jesus himself seemed to be blessing the amalgamation of the Methodist, Congregational, most Presbyterian and the new Union churches into a single United Church of Canada.

This year marks the Centennial of that founding service for the United Church of Canada, and I was hoping that this would be a time of celebration around what the United Church has accomplished over the past 100 years. However, as 2025 now comes to an end our celebrations seemed to have been a bit tentative. We seem to be saying something like: "Thanks be to God that the United Church has made it to 100 years. Who could have seen that coming?" We in the United Church seem to spend a lot of time worrying about our demise. At our Centennial General Council meeting in Calgary this summer, commissioners spent half a day receiving a report from some demographic experts predicting a tiny, shrinking United Church by 2035. According to their estimates, in 10 years time there could be only 8,174 attending Sunday worship, about 7 per cent of actual worshippers in 2023. Identifiable givers could number 46,959, only 3 per cent of the number of actual givers in 2023. Participation in Sunday school will likely fall to 2,554, only 14 per cent of the 2023 value.

Scary stuff I suppose, but we United Church old-timers have been told to expect our imminent death before. 58 years ago, in 1967, an earlier generation of population experts got a contract from the United Church to predict our future, and they said that we would no longer exist in the mid-90's. Well, it is now 30 years after we were supposed to have vanished, so it now seems safe to say that these projections were completely wrong. I don't expect the latest predictions to be any better. For example, these new experts are predicting 8,174 worship attenders in 10 years' time across all of Canada; not 8,173 or 8,175 mind you, but exactly 8,174 - unbelievable precision that destroys any credibility they might have had. Estimates these detailed should have come with their corresponding error bars.

Even so, we must concede that all churches are clearly shrinking as society generally becomes less enamoured of organized religion, and the General Council is right to take whatever actions they can to maintain healthy congregations like Fairlawn. That will be my subject for next week's sermon.

I think it is unfortunate that the United Church has not used its Centennial year to really celebrate what the United Church has accomplished for Canada and for Canadians in its 100 years. The fact is that our church has changed lives for people in its pews but also for Canadians in general.

As someone who has been a United Church person for more than three-quarters of a century now, I have personally experienced many events in the United Church during my single, individual life that were life-defining for me and that I continue to celebrate in every year, not just during our Centennial.

Throughout my life I have been changed and inspired by my experience in the church. I entered high school when the "New Curriculum" was being introduced in 1964, and was fortunate enough to have had a theologically educated Sunday School teacher until I graduated from high school. The New Curriculum was an ambitious United Church Christian Education project for children and adults that brought lay people up to date with what was

then being routinely taught in theological schools. I attended a United Church university in New Brunswick for my first science degree when Howard Mills was the University chaplain there. Howie would go on to become the General Secretary of the national church, providing important leadership during the controversy around ordaining LGBTQ people and celebrating gay marriage. His immediate family continues to worship here at Fairlawn. In my senior year at university, I chaired the student committee that hosted a visit by Dr. Robert McLure when he was the United Church Moderator. Bob McLure was the closest thing we have to a saint in the United Church. He spent his entire working life as a medical missionary in many third world countries, and was elected as our first layperson moderator when he returned to Canada in retirement. When I moved to Toronto for graduate studies, I attended Bloor Street United when Bruce McLeod and later Clifford Elliott were ministers there. Bruce also served as the Moderator of the national church and both he and Cliff were celebrated in Hye-Ran Kim-Cragg's book celebrating United Church preachers over the past 100 years.

All throughout my time in university and later during my scientific career I have never had to "check my brains at the door" before participating in the life of the United Church I attended. I had a successful scientific career in cloud physics and climate change research, serving the United Church throughout that time in various ways.

I was in my 50's when I discovered the work of David Hallman, an employee of the United Church's General Council who became the Co-ordinator of the World Council of Churches Climate Change Programme from 1988 to 2006. In this position David was involved in UN global negotiations on climate change for 18 years. He wrote four books on eco-theology and climate change and received honorary doctorates from United Church theology schools in Toronto and Montreal. I was a climate change scientist back then, and had been elected as a Fellow of the Canadian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society for my work, but returned to University to learn more about eco-theology and eventually became a minister for the last 10 years of my career.

My connections with the United Church during my entire life changed me and made me who I am. I cannot believe that my story is unique or particularly special. The United Church of Canada has positively impacted thousands of people both inside and outside its congregations throughout its 100 year history. Perhaps some of you have had life-altering experiences in the United Church too. Surely we should celebrate this no matter how large or small the denomination may become in the future.

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So, how did the United Church of Canada come to be? Where did such a church come from and why is it still here?

Our United Church exists only in Canada, and was created with the specific intention to be of "friendly service" to Canada. This intention was expressed by our founders at the very beginning of the decade-long process that finally led to the inaugural worship service in 1925.

After a meeting in 1914 of the leaders from the separate churches that would eventually form the United Church these leaders wrote the following: (quote)

“It shall be the policy of the United Church to foster the spirit of unity in the hope that this unity may in due time take shape in a church ... that would relate in a very particular way to the nation of Canada and be of “friendly service” to the whole nation.”¹ From the very beginning, the founders of the United Church wanted to build a church that would become a Canadian embodiment of Christianity, which would grow along with the young nation into its final place in the world. It was a bold, ambitious goal, but it worked!

The amalgamation of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches into a single United Church had never happened anywhere in the world before. It happened in Canada because our country is too big and too sparsely populated for multiple denominations to survive by themselves in most parts of the country during the early 1900's. Phyllis Airhart illustrates this challenge very well in her story about William Birks of the famous Birks Jewellers Company as he was trying to attend a church in Schreiber, Ontario during a train delay in his trip home to Montreal². On what he called a “typical November Sunday” Birks worshipped at the Presbyterian church in Schreiber with two men, a few women and some children. He later learned that attendance at other places of worship in Schreiber was no better: two men at the nearby Anglican church, three men at the Methodist church across the road, and only one man at the Baptist church close by. Birks was shocked to learn that not one of the ministers at the Schreiber churches was paid as much as his chauffeur.

Schreiber was one of a large number of whistle stops across northern Ontario and western Canada created when the CP railway line was constructed. Birks experience in Schreiber convinced him that 20th Century Canada could not be properly Christianized unless the existing denominations came together to form a single church, and he took that message back to his Presbyterian church in Montreal.

The challenges in Schreiber were replicated across the country. In many towns and villages in northern Ontario and western Canada, the residents solved the problem by building “Union” churches where people from all denominations were welcome. It was the only way that these tiny, isolated towns could afford to have a church at all. In many ways, these Union churches pushed Christians in larger towns and cities to consider union as well. In a newspaper article published in 1917 entitled “Why We Want Church Union in the Prairie Provinces”, Walter Murray, the first President of the University of Saskatchewan, wrote that “unless Union comes soon, the present Union Churches will develop into a new church that will sweep Western Canada”.³ The old European denominations in the east would be left behind.

1 Phyllis Airhart: A Church with the Soul of a Nation - Making and remaking the United Church of Canada pp 5).

2 Phyllis Airhart, pp 30

3 Phyllis Airhart, pp. 27

“And so it was actually the cold, massive, Canadian landscape itself that brought forth a uniquely Canadian kind of Christianity designed for its intrepid pioneers - one that welcomed people of all races and denominations, and was more concerned with pastoral care and fellowship than theological fine points. Some detractors called us a creedless church assuming that all religious beliefs had to follow ancient documents and never change. But United Church creeds were allowed to evolve as the country evolved. Beginning with the 20 Articles of Doctrine in 1925, we got a new “Statement of Faith” (1940), The United Church Creed (1968) and A Song of Faith (2006). Each has been approved by the General Councils of their day as expressing the fundamental beliefs of our church. Together, they provide a resilient, flexible understanding of God’s work in the world that makes sense in a post-modern society.

So when we come together to thank God for a Canada that is open to different languages, different races, different sexual orientations and different points of view; when we celebrate a Canada that seeks peace and not war, and a Canada that welcomes newcomers, then we should also thank God for its United Church, which over the past 100 years has both reflected and enhanced these distinctly Canadian values. I believe that Canada and its United Church have so completely evolved together that they have become two sides of the same coin.

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Throughout my life I have experienced the United Church giving “friendly service” to Canada, but never more so than right now as Canada and Canadian life have come under attack from the United States. When Donald Trump muses about Canada being absorbed as the 51st state, United Church people should immediately see this as an existential threat against our United Church of Canada. There simply could never be a place in Donald Trump’s America for a Christian church that practices its faith the way that we do.

For example, women play an essential role in the United Church of Canada at the congregational level, the order of ministry and the national executive. The United Church of Canada has a long history of ordaining women, beginning with Lydia Gruchy in 1936. This was well before other mainline denominations, and the church’s policies have evolved since then to include no discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, or marital status for ministry. Women are fully integrated into all levels of ordained and lay ministry within the church.

So, It simply goes without saying that, for example, the United Church supports a woman’s right to choose to end her pregnancy. It also means that LGBTQ minorities are recognized as equal citizens. These equality provisions are fully recognized in Canadian law as well as in the United Church, but none of this could continue if Canada became the 51st state in Donald Trump’s America.

The United Church of Canada’s response to medical and climate science is another reason why our church could not survive in a country led by Donald Trump. During the recent pandemic

lockdown period, some Canadian churches defied orders by the Canadian government to suspend services but the United Church decreed that its churches would respect the law. Regarding climate change, the United Church of Canada is a world leader among Christian churches with respect to its support for the Paris Agreement to reduce atmospheric carbon, an agreement from which the Trump administration has withdrawn during both his terms.

For these and many other reasons the United Church of Canada is in total agreement with the Canadian government in its opposition to the policies of the Trump administration. Our church has no place in Trump's world. The issue now is how individual church congregations like Fairlawn United might respond to these existential challenges now being faced by both Canada and its United Church, and I will try to say something about that next week.

Both Canada and its United Church are under threat right now by a value system that denies and seeks to destroy all that has made Canada and its United Church a beacon of hope in an increasingly war-like and divided world. The United Church leadership as well as its congregations across the country are being called to act in the midst of this crisis, knowing that God is walking with through whatever the future holds. May we all have the courage to respond here and now.

Amen

