

**Response of The United Church of Canada  
to *The Nature and Mission of the Church*  
March 2010**

**Process**

The General Council of The United Church of Canada has a number of working committees whose membership includes lay and ordered persons from across the country. The document *The Nature and Mission of the Church* was sent to the *Theology and Faith Committee* and the *Interchurch and Interfaith Committee* requesting a response. These two committees formed a task group of members from both groups, plus two staff persons from the national General Council Office. In a number of meetings over the past two years this task group has carefully looked at the document and discussed its theological relevance to the United Church and our Canadian context.

**Response**

We welcome the opportunity to study the nature and mission of the church and we are appreciative of a process which encourages convergence of belief while acknowledging areas of disagreement. This study provides helpful guidance as we examine our own ecclesiology and continue in dialogue with our ecumenical partners.

To honour the ecumenical effort of a convergence paper we receive the text of *The Nature and Mission of the Church* as a basis for a common ecclesiology. In principle we agree with its theological statements. However, in light of our contextual experiences and our relationships with our interchurch and interfaith partners, we request clarification on statements pertaining to mission and evangelism as the church. How can the mission of the church best be furthered in light of the *Missio Dei* and interfaith relations? In addition, there are essential pieces of our current self-understanding as church which are missing from this document. How is the nature of the church affected by the dialectical tension between being and doing and by the emerging church movement? How will our ecclesiology reflect the challenges of fundamental shifts in church and society, calling us from crisis to transformation?

***I. Mission of the Church: Missio Dei and Interfaith Relations***

The mission focus of the church is always embedded in the much broader *Missio Dei*. The United Church has affirmed that our engagement in mission is always rooted in the commitment to witness to and participate in God's mission of wholeness of life for all people and all of creation. Norms of partnership, right relations and transformative justice are foundational for our participation in God's mission.<sup>1</sup> We work in partnership with people of different faiths and beliefs to seek the healing of creation which is central to God's mission. We believe that God's revelation is given to "sheep of other folds" which includes not only other Christian denominations but other faith traditions. To this end, the *Missio Dei* is found in all of creation.

Even while we speak of the mission of the church and the *Missio Dei*, The United Church of Canada has learned to speak cautiously of mission. We cannot agree with an uncritical use of the term "mission" because of the tremendous harm that has been propagated throughout church history in the name of Christ and the mission of the church. In Canada, our legacy of the Indian Residential Schools has heightened our sensibility to the danger of mission misused to oppress

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<sup>1</sup> See *Reviewing Partnership in the Context of Empire* (2009)

other people and their religious and cultural heritage. We urge that any document employing the term “mission,” including *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, needs to clarify both what is meant and not meant by this term, particularly in light of the church’s historical abuse of people of other faith traditions.

The United Church of Canada celebrates the increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Canadian society, as well as the growing relationships Canadians entertain with people of different faiths in other parts of the world. Over the last few decades, the theological and ethical implications of our complex interfaith world have been at the forefront of the United Church’s interest. They have been addressed in numerous United Church dialogues, studies and reports.<sup>2</sup> Appendix I contains key quotes from some of these studies.

We have come to a position where we cannot define our church apart from its relationship to our neighbours of different faiths. We identify the interfaith reality and its challenge to the Christian churches as a significant matter which is not adequately addressed in *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.

The United Church of Canada has an understanding of mission that is close to the one reflected on p. 10 of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, in that relations with other faiths constitute an important context for mission. We resist a proselytizing faith which seeks to convert people of other faiths to Christianity. To this end, we request further clarification of a few sentences in the main text of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.

One problematic section is § 34: “It is God’s design to gather all creation under the Lordship of Christ (cf. Eph 1:10)”. We do not believe this to be God’s design for creation, nor do we believe it to be the church’s mission. In addition, this is an inaccurate translation of the meaning of Ephesians 1:10. Within the context of § 34, what is meant by the phrases: “It is the will of God that the communion in Christ, which is realised in the Church, should embrace the whole creation” (§ 33); “the Church seeks faithfully to proclaim and live the love of God for all, and to fulfil Christ’s mission for the salvation and transformation of the world, to the glory of God” (§ 41); and “Through redeemed humanity the whole world is meant to be drawn to the goal of restoration and salvation” (§ 42)? If these phrases imply that the mission of the Church is to seek the conversion of humanity to Christianity and that salvation is found only within Christianity, we cannot accept these descriptions of mission within a convergence document. On the contrary, we believe that the Church needs to confess its arrogance and contribution to the violence of colonialism through its historical proselytism and mission of forced conversions to Christianity.

The United Church of Canada has offered apologies to the Aboriginal peoples of this land for imposing the Gospel of Christ on them and stripping them of their own faith, traditional teachings and culture. If, on the other hand, salvation and transformation of the world implies the healing of broken relationships and reconciliation of all of God’s creation, as described in § 40, we can agree with the above phrases in this paragraph.

Section 110 states “There is no contradiction between evangelisation and respect for the values present in other faiths.” We believe this to be possible, but if evangelisation includes proselytism and its objective is the conversion of others, we consider this to be a significant contradiction to the respect of those of other faiths. Unless this is clarified, we find it difficult to accept this section.

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<sup>2</sup> *Mending the World. An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation (1997); Bearing Faithful Witness. United Church - Jewish Relations Today (2003); That We May Know Each Other: United Church - Muslim Relations Today (2006).*

If these sections cannot be clarified in the above manner, they may need to be placed within text boxes of difference, rather than remain within the convergence text. We know that the standpoint of The United Church of Canada is not necessarily shared by other Christian churches. We understand that the differences in denominational responses to the theological challenge of our interfaith reality can create a new, potentially church-dividing issue. However, we feel strongly enough about the respect of other faith traditions and the acknowledgement of the church's sin of colonialism that we request these differences be acknowledged within the text's boxes of differences, rather than be subsumed with the convergence text.

## ***II. The Nature of the Church: Dialectical Tension of Being and Doing; Emerging Church Movement***

The United Church of Canada has produced succinct statements of ecclesiology throughout its history including those contained in the Basis of Union (1925)<sup>3</sup>, 1940 Statement of Faith<sup>4</sup> and A Song of Faith (2006)<sup>5</sup>. Our interfaith work has also helped us to further define who we are as church. In one of our interfaith documents, *Mending the World*, we have produced a statement on the nature of the church (see Appendix II: An Affirmation).

Within these statements, the United Church has consistently emphasized the actions of the church even as it defines the ontological nature of the church. It has attempted to hold together the dialectical tension of being and doing. On the one hand, the church is Christ's body. It is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic community created by God. We are the church. On the other hand, we are continually called into being the church through particular actions. Typically we do theology contextually in the United Church, which means our understanding of church evolves out of our lived experience of it and it is always linked to purpose and action. A good example of this is how the church is described through verbs in *A New Creed* (1968):

We are called to be the Church:  
to celebrate God's presence,  
to live with respect in Creation,  
to love and serve others,  
to seek justice and resist evil,  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
our judge and our hope.

We have learned that to neglect the action aspect of the church is to become ideological, insular and irrelevant both to the world and to the *Missio Dei*. To neglect the being aspect is to lose our historical roots of the faith and to lose sight of the Holy One who stands both with us as the ground of our being and against us as a corrective to our sinful nature.

The United Church has deeply integrated the traditional four marks of the church. However, we cannot abstract the holiness of the church from its brokenness. In a recent bilateral Roman Catholic – United Church Dialogue in Canada, the ecclesiological consequences of both denominations' involvements with the residential schools for Aboriginal children were examined. The report "Sin, Reconciliation and Ecclesial Identity" comes to the following conclusion:

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<sup>3</sup> Basis of Union 2.15 Article XV. *Of the Church*. and 2.18 Article XVIII. *Of Church Order and Fellowship*., see [www.united-church.ca/history/overview/basisofunion](http://www.united-church.ca/history/overview/basisofunion)

<sup>4</sup> Statement of Faith VII. The Church, see [www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements/1940](http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements/1940)

<sup>5</sup> See [www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements/songfaith](http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements/songfaith), pp.7-8.

United Church of Canada tradition sees the church as a 'Body of Christ,' understood as a gathering together of the diverse gifts of the whole people of God. Within this body, always understood to be a community of sinners, we carry both the faults and the blessings of the community. ...

When its members commit sinful acts in the name of the church, the church has a responsibility both to call the sinful to repentance and to repent collectively as Christ's disciples who have failed him and his gospel. Because the church has, as its central mission, the preaching of the message, it can sin, but still bear the good news.<sup>6</sup>

The United Church has learned that it needs God to stand both with us and against us as we risk action which we pray will further the *Missio Dei* but also acknowledge is susceptible to sin. The nature of the church, at its very core, is a holy creation of God called to humbly incarnate the *Missio Dei* as Christ's broken body in the world. If we give little heed to the church's historical actions in the world, the church risks repeating sinful actions of the past and is not aware of its own broken nature. We lose the crucial balance between being and doing.

We find that *The Nature and Mission of the Church* has placed primary emphasis upon the being aspect of the church with very little attention given to the church's actions. This undermines the dialectical tension of the church's very nature. We would appreciate further elaboration of the doing aspect of the church within *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. To give equal attention to ontology and action will help the church not only be aware of its own holy yet sinful nature, but also help it to be more relevant in the world.

If both the being and doing aspects of the church are held together, they will influence each other and better enable the church to respond to the Holy Spirit in attending to the emerging needs of the world. As the church attends to the world's emerging needs, we believe that the church will itself evolve into an emerging church, guided by the continuous revelation and wisdom of the Spirit.

The United Church of Canada is currently considering what it means to be an emerging church. Our contextual theology is deeply challenged these days by the fundamental shifts we experience in our church life. In our Canadian context the increasing secularization of the general culture, a rapid loss of active membership and diminishing financial resources force us to rethink who we are as a church and how we need to transform ourselves in order to adjust to a rapidly changing world. We have a sense that our institutional structures and our traditional ways of forming community, teaching faith, worshipping God and contributing to public life are no longer adequate for a church which desires to be faithful to the mission God calls the church to live in this world. Our traditional church model seems to dissolve, while new emerging trends appear. To both our latest General Councils (2006 and 2009) came appeals to seek a renewed purpose and a vision for the future of our church.<sup>7</sup> It has become obvious that we can no longer ignore the signs that we are in a crucial time of change in the church. This change has begun to happen through the downsizing and restructuring of our national offices but it has far deeper theological implications for the spiritual reality of our church.

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<sup>6</sup> [www.united-church.ca/files/partners/relations/ecumenical/report\\_rc\\_02.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/files/partners/relations/ecumenical/report_rc_02.pdf), p.8.

<sup>7</sup> See the outcome of intentional discernment at General Council 39 (2006) summarized in *Call to Purpose: A message from the church to the church* [www.united-church.ca/files/organization/governance/calltopurpose.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/files/organization/governance/calltopurpose.pdf) and a document to General Council 40 prepared by the General Secretary of the United Church to lay out the challenges the church is currently facing: *Called to Be Church. Toward a Unifying Vision* [www.united-church.ca/files/communications/news/generalsecretary/090206\\_calledtobechurch.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/files/communications/news/generalsecretary/090206_calledtobechurch.pdf)

Emerging Spirit is a major campaign in the United Church which has been conducted over the past three years.<sup>8</sup> It has addressed the visibility and relevance of the church for younger generations today. An analysis of the current social context and an exploration of the deep purpose of the church have been achieved through ground-breaking research, a national media campaign, interactive websites (Wondercafe and Caféchange) and congregational learning events. The results push us to look further into different ways of being church. One example is the possibility of a shift from neighbourhood churches which are geographically defined to “network” churches, where people bond with others of same interest. How could forming internet communities in this regard be an expression of church life?

This campaign has shown us that younger generations are more interested in openness to discuss theological questions than in receiving rote answers. A culture of “listening” is more important to them than a culture of “telling”. People are not looking for concepts of God, but for an experience of God. A greater interest in spirituality and mystery is emerging. Denominational identity is dissolving, people are turning away from organized religion and our interfaith reality is acknowledged. At the same time meaningful involvement in the community and the world gives purpose to people.

Apart from this research project, some congregations within our church are setting new priorities and experimenting with new ways of being church. The “Emerging Church Movement” is happening, although it has no clearly delineated features at this point. However, some broad trends are being identified across North America. Author Phyllis Tickle proposes that emergent theologies emphasize a different set of the four attributes of the church today, namely Mission, Community, Worship and Mystery.<sup>9</sup> Bruce Sanguin, a United Church minister in Vancouver, writes in his book *The Emerging Church*: “An emerging congregation, by my definition, is one that is always looking out at the horizon for the future that desires to be born *through them*. They are aware that the Spirit-driven universe is evolving in and through their common life together. ... I am referring to congregations who are making a shift from a redemption-centred theological model to a creation-centred, evolutionary Christian theology.”<sup>10</sup>

In sum, a new awareness of the presence of the Spirit within the church and the world is arising. People are responding spiritually, but are moving away from traditional church structures. In the United Church we are asking how this shift will impact our way to do and be church in the future. We have a sense that our whole understanding of church is in the process of being reshaped, and we know that similar movements are happening around the world.

While we honour the theological roots of the church as reflected in *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, there is little mention in this document of this time of transition and change for the Christian Church. It would be helpful for us if the recent developments and shifting understandings in ecclesiology can be included. We may find ground for a common statement on traditional ecclesiology but it may not carry much weight nor foster greater understanding and unity in the future if the current existential changes in ecclesiology are not taken into account. One example of this is the language of the document which is far removed from the United Church's commitment to inclusive and non-hierarchical expressions of church and theology. This, in itself, presents a significant barrier to the appeal of the document within United Church circles.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.emergingspirit.ca/about\\_emerging\\_spirit](http://www.emergingspirit.ca/about_emerging_spirit)

<sup>9</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Sanguin, *The Emerging Church: A Model For Change & A Map For Renewal* (Kelowna, B.C. : CopperHouse, 2008), p.23. Emphasis in original.

### ***Summary***

We have appreciated the opportunity to study and be challenged by *The Nature and Mission of the Church*. We value our ecumenical relationships and pray that this study will further our common work and worship as the one body of Christ. We also appreciate the format of this document which seeks to establish a convergence text and honour ongoing areas of disagreement.

To further this purpose, we ask for clarification of particular terms and sections relating to the mission and evangelism of the church. We also ask that reference be made to the *Missio Dei* as it relates to our interfaith relations. In addition, we ask that more attention be given to the historical actions of the church, such as the Canadian Indian residential schools experience, and their impact on our understanding of the church as a locus of both sin and grace. We would appreciate further emphasis on what the church is called to do in this world. This would honour the dialectical tension of the being and doing aspects of the nature of the church. Finally, we request that this document recognize that our known structures of church are in a process of profound transformation and new forms of ecclesial expression are emerging!

## Appendix I: Quotes from United Churches Studies on Mission and Interfaith Relations

### **Report of the Commission on World Mission (1966):**

*“The church should recognize that God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of all mankind. Christians have much to learn, as well as to contribute, through dialogue with people of other faiths. Their special responsibility is to present the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus in humble and sincere dialogue in ways which will respect each other’s integrity.” (quoted from That We May Know Each Other, Appendix D, p.74)*

### **Mending the World. An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation (1997):**

*“Life in the ‘whole inhabited earth’ (oikoumene) is life in relationship. We are bound up with one another and with the world of nature - not just to our kinfolk, or our kind.*

*We are thus led to speak of ‘whole world ecumenism,’ naming the search for justice for God’s creatures and healing for God’s creation as the church’s first priority, and joining with other persons of good will in the search for justice, wholeness and love.” (p.2)*

*“We believe that God calls the Church*

*to profess its faith in ways that honour God’s love for all people and creation  
to make decisions that demonstrate and unqualified commitment to justice, peace  
and compassion*

*to work in partnership with all who seek the health and well-being of the whole  
creation*

*to discern and celebrate God’s Spirit in people of other religions and ideologies  
to stand first with the poor.” (p.5)*

*“Partnership is a key concept in whole world ecumenism. It implies mutuality and collaboration.” (p.21)*

*“Partnership or dialogue require humility which is capable of learning from others. ... God may well be encountered in the wisdom and loving spirit of the others. Christians have to be prepared to grow and, possibly, to change their minds about some things in the process of dialogue and partnership.” (p.23)*

### **That We May Know Each Other. United Church - Muslim Relations Today (2006):**

*“The United Church of Canada affirms that God, whose love we have found in Jesus Christ ... also works in others.” (p.1)*

*“The United Church of Canada invites the church to participate in dialogue that upholds the integrity of each tradition ...” (p.2)*

*“... we believe it is critical that the United Church find the theological language that allows it to affirm the plurality of the world’s religious life as a sign of a sovereign God who cannot be contained within one culture or tradition. It should be understood, then, that categories of religious perspective are, in the end, made secondary to the call for common action for the sake of a suffering world. Our institutional church life, including our theological endeavours, are judged by their capacity to bring healing, justice, and peace into our troubled world.” (pp.6-7)*

*“We believe that it is possible for the church to continue to affirm its own distinctive self-identity while affirming that other faiths and traditions will have their own self-understanding. Our emphasis is on allowing others to define for themselves how they see themselves and affirming that God has many ways of being known in the world.” (p.7)*

*“... scripture teaches that the Word and Wisdom of God is not limited to Christians, and the Spirit of God is free and faithful. Such a starting point opens us to the discovery of truth and wisdom in the other. With this expectation, the purpose is not to collapse the differences between traditions but rather to affirm and cherish the differences because ultimately they are each gifts of God, which can be life-giving and transformative.” (p.7)*

## **Appendix II: An Affirmation from *Mending the World: An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation***

We believe that the Church's passion to be involved in the transformation of the world is grounded in its relationship to God in Jesus Christ<sup>1</sup>

We believe that God calls the Church to do separately only what it cannot do with others to care for itself in order to care for others to set basic human needs above institutional enrichment to give and not to count the cost<sup>2</sup>

We believe that God calls the Church to help build a culture of non-violence and respect of solidarity and just economic relationships of tolerance and truthfulness of equal rights and partnership between men and women<sup>3</sup>

We believe that God calls the Church to profess its faith in ways that honour God's love for all people and creation to make decisions that demonstrate an unqualified commitment to justice, peace and compassion to work in partnership with all who seek the health and well-being of the whole creation to discern and celebrate God's Spirit in people of other religions<sup>4</sup> and ideologies to stand first with the poor<sup>5</sup>

We believe that God calls the Church to do justice and love kindness to show courage in the face of evil to seek reformation for itself and society to share God's liberating and empowering work to trust in God<sup>6</sup>

We believe that God yearns for the healing of all creation, and calls the Church to share that yearning by joining now with other persons of good will in the search for justice, wholeness and love.

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<sup>1</sup> Santiago de Compostella, WCC, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> St. Ignatius Loyola.

<sup>3</sup> Stanza based upon the Global Ethic, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Stanza based upon the chapter "Whole World Ecumenism" in the study document *Toward a Renewed Understanding of Ecumenism*, 1994 (phr. 1-3), the Report of the Commission on World Mission, 1996, (phr. 4).

<sup>5</sup> "In his beatitudes, his healings, and his table fellowship with outcasts and sinners, Jesus declares God's special concern for the oppressed. God sides with the poor, not because of their virtue, but because of the suffering; not because of their suffering but because they have been sinned against." (from *Engaging the Powers*, Walter Wink, p. 112).

<sup>6</sup> Stanza based upon Micah 6.8 and the Creed of The United Church of Canada.



### **Appendix III: Excerpt from A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of The United Church of Canada (2006)**

We sing of a church

seeking to continue the story of Jesus  
by embodying Christ's presence in the world.

We are called together by Christ

as a community of broken but hopeful believers,  
loving what he loved,  
living what he taught,  
striving to be faithful servants of God  
in our time and place.

Our ancestors in faith

bequeath to us experiences of their faithful living;  
upon their lives our lives are built.

Our living of the gospel makes us a part of this communion of saints,

experiencing the fulfillment of God's reign  
even as we actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth.

The church has not always lived up to its vision.

It requires the Spirit to reorient it,

helping it to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition,  
challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement,

for we are called to be a blessing to the earth.

We sing of God's good news lived out,

a church with purpose:

faith nurtured and hearts comforted,  
gifts shared for the good of all,  
resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize,  
fierce love in the face of violence,  
human dignity defended,  
members of a community held and inspired by God,  
corrected and comforted,  
instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ,  
creation's mending.

We sing of God's mission.