

## **A Background Document on Essential Agreement From the Theology Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee**

### **Introduction**

Since church union in 1925 the United Church has required persons entering ministry to be in “essential agreement” with the denomination’s Statement of Doctrine and to see that Statement of Doctrine as in substance agreeable to the teachings of Scripture. Yet, uncertainty exists currently in some quarters in the denomination as to the meaning of the term.

This paper has been prepared in response to a motion adopted by the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Council (2018) directing “the Theology, Inter-Church, Inter-Faith Committee to engage in a study of the meaning of ‘essential agreement.’” The Committee will outline some misconceptions concerning essential agreement, recount the reasons for the adoption of the concept of essential agreement during the negotiations for church union in the early twentieth century, state what essential agreement means, and explain why this concept continues to be important in the examination of persons seeking commissioning, ordination, recognition, admission, or readmission as ministry personnel in The United Church of Canada.

### **Misconceptions about the Meaning of Essential Agreement**

At least two misconceptions appear to exist about “essential agreement.” Some persons interpret the term as meaning “literal agreement.” They think that candidates for ministry in The United Church of Canada must, during their final interview, convince the examining committee that they believe and accept each and every word of the United Church’s Statement of Doctrine. That understanding has never been the case in the United Church. The Congregationalists argued, successfully, against the adoption of such an approach during the church union negotiations.

Other persons in the United Church seem to understand that because the denomination does not require “literal subscription” (i.e., literal agreement) to its Statement of Doctrine, a candidate for ministry, and ministry personnel themselves, can believe whatever they like and still claim to be in essential agreement. In the debate about church union after the completion of the Basis of Union in 1908, some opponents of church union, particularly in the Presbyterian Church, argued that the concept of essential agreement was so broad that it would allow anyone—including Unitarians, Christian Scientists, or Mormons, to name three examples cited<sup>1</sup>—to claim congruence with the Statement of Doctrine. This understanding, that one could believe whatever one liked and still qualify for ministry in the United Church, was neither then nor now an accurate interpretation of the meaning of essential agreement.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Lloyd Morrow, *Church Union in Canada* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1923), 136.

## **Why Did the United Church Adopt the Concept of “Essential Agreement” and What Does it Mean?**

Once the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Methodists concluded in 1904 that no fundamental impediments existed to the three denominations coming together as one, a Joint Committee of representatives from all three denominations met annually between 1904 and 1908 to develop a Basis of Union. The Doctrine sub-committee found themselves able to prepare the Doctrine section of the Basis of Union with relative ease. However, agreeing on what would be required of candidates for the ministry in relation to the Statement of Doctrine proved much more challenging.

The debate about the relationship of candidates to the Statement of Doctrine took place in the Ministry sub-committee. Both the Presbyterian and Methodist members of the sub-committee wanted to require candidates for ministry to offer a literal subscription to the Statement of Doctrine. Such an approach matched the general practice of those two denominations, although individuals within both of those denominations had been raising questions for some time about their traditional practices. The Congregationalists resisted the proposal for literal subscription. They had no difficulty with a rigorous examination of a prospective minister's theology. Such a painstaking assessment, along with a thorough look at the individual's character and Christian commitment, was Congregationalist practice. What they resisted was the requirement of literal subscription to any creed or doctrinal statement. They believed that the Holy Spirit could lead a candidate to a new understanding or a different expression of elements of the faith tradition. They also believed that the examining committee could judge whether the candidate's theology was sufficiently orthodox as to be within the faith tradition. Their perspective, which was also their hope for the proposed new denomination, was well expressed in the minutes of the 1907 meeting of the Joint Committee:

“That in the matter of ordination to the Christian ministry, we [the Congregationalists] consider that it will best safeguard the intellectual integrity of ministers, and at the same time preserve the Church from formalism, if at the ordination of candidates to the ministry they shall not be compelled to give an absolute subscription to a creed, but, having before them the Doctrinal Statement of the Church, may frankly and in their own language, indicate their relation thereto. It shall then remain with the ordaining body to decide as to the acceptance of a candidate, great importance always being attached to his general spirit and character.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Proceedings of the Fourth Conference of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Committees on Church Union”, in “Report of the Committee on Union with Other Churches”, in *The Acts and Proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* [1908], Appendices, p. 327.

The debate among the parties to union went on for more than a year. Only when the Congregationalists finally threatened to leave the talks on church union did the Presbyterians and the Methodists relent and agree to have the new United Church follow the Congregational approach. Candidates for ministry would be required to convince the examining committee that they were in “essential agreement” with the Statement of Doctrine and that they accepted “the statement as being in substance agreeable to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>3</sup>

Essential agreement also fit well with the understanding the Doctrine sub-committee had had of its task in preparing a Statement of Doctrine. Thomas B. Kilpatrick, a member of the sub-committee, asserted that the Statement of Doctrine contained “the essential Christian verities.”<sup>4</sup> In the Preamble to the 20 Articles of Doctrine (the original Statement of Doctrine in the Basis of Union), the Doctrine sub-committee made clear that in the Statement they had “set forth the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us.”<sup>5</sup> They understood there was a Christian tradition that had been passed down through the ages, a tradition in which they stood. Their “brief summary” of the Christian faith aligned with that tradition. They expressed this understanding in the Preamble to the Statement of Doctrine: “We acknowledge the teaching of the great creeds of the ancient Church. We further maintain our allegiance to the evangelical doctrines of the Reformation, as set forth in common in the doctrinal standards adopted by The Presbyterian Church in Canada, by The Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec, and by The Methodist Church.”<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, though they believed there were “essential Christian verities,” the words in which “the substance or essence of the Christian faith” is conveyed “has the imperfection, which must belong to all efforts to express in forms of human thought, and language, meanings that are eternal, and divine.”<sup>7</sup> They believed that the words in which any creed or doctrinal statement was expressed were inevitably contextual and therefore time bound. For that reason, the drafters of the original Doctrine section of the Basis of Union believed that “creed revision is the inherent right, and the continual duty, of a living Church.”<sup>8</sup> They expected that this new United Church would re-state those Christian essentials from time to time, in the context of subsequent generations.

Given this viewpoint about doctrinal statements, requiring literal subscription to a document whose wording was time bound (even if the “substance or essence of the Christian faith” it conveyed was not) made no sense. Requiring essential agreement to the Statement of Doctrine, however, did fit well with such an understanding. After the fashion of the Congregationalists, the new United Church adopted the position that the best way to determine whether a candidate stood sufficiently in the faith tradition was to have an

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<sup>3</sup> Basis of Union, 13.2, *The Manual*, (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 2019), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas B. Kilpatrick, *Our Common Faith* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1928), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Basis of Union, 2.3.0

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Kilpatrick, *Our Common Faith*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

examining committee hear the candidate recount their theological understandings rather than to require adherence to some form of literal subscription.

Another key point is that candidates do not self-determine whether they are in essential agreement. That determination is the role of the examining committee. Alfred Gandier, the Principal of Knox College from 1908 through to church union in 1925 and the first Principal of Emmanuel College, expressed this point with particular clarity:

The examining body are to be satisfied that the candidate's views are in essential agreement with the "Doctrinal Statement" and furthermore he is required to accept the statement itself "as in substance agreeable to the teachings of the Holy Scriptures." His mere assent, however, is not sufficient. The final judgment on his qualifications is reserved in the hands of the conference. No mere formal acceptance of the letter of a written creed is counted sufficient; the church itself through its living members is to decide whether each candidate is in essential agreement with the doctrines of the church. After all, that is the only protection possible against unworthy men or women out of harmony with the faith of the church.<sup>9</sup>

It is apparent, therefore, that in the minds of the framers of the Basis of Union, essential agreement did not (and does not) mean literal agreement with every word of the Statement of Doctrine, but at the same time it did not (and does not) imply that the examination of a candidate's theology will be less than rigorous, or that a candidate can espouse a theology which breaks sharply from continuity with the historic Christian tradition (in other words, the principle of essential agreement is not a licence for candidates, or ministers, to adopt any creed or doctrine they choose).

Essential agreement means that the examining committee must be able to find that the candidate they are interviewing stands sufficiently within the Christian tradition, as expressed in the United Church's Statement of Doctrine. The committee must be able to reach this conclusion because those whom it agrees to recommend for authorized ministry must be able to teach, preach, do pastoral care, and provide outreach and service to the wider community in continuity with the Christian faith as expressed in the doctrine of the United Church. In carrying out the ministerial office, ministers re-present the Christian tradition and the United Church to those with whom they interact, both inside and outside the particular communities they serve. They need to be able to carry out those functions of ministry faithfully and with integrity.

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<sup>9</sup> Alfred Gandier, "The Ministry in the Basis" in "Church Union, An Opportunity and a Duty by a Group of Presbyterians" (Toronto, Murray Printing Company, 1915), quoted in Morrow, *Church Union in Canada*, 134-135.

## **What is the Statement of Doctrine with which a Candidate must be in “essential agreement?”**

The Statement of Doctrine currently consists of the Preamble and Twenty Articles that formed the original Doctrine section of the Basis of Union (albeit as that section has been amended on a few occasions since 1925), plus three other United Church faith statements adopted by various General Councils. These three other statements were added to the Statement of Doctrine by a process initiated at the 41<sup>st</sup> General Council (2009). That General Council authorized three remits to determine whether the *1940 Statement of Faith*, the *New Creed* (also known as the *United Church Creed*), and *A Song of Faith* should be added to the then-existing Doctrine section of the Basis of Union. Since the necessary threshold of an absolute majority of the Presbyteries and of the Pastoral Charge governing boards approving the addition of each of these statements was achieved, the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Council enacted the remits.

All four sections of the Statement of Doctrine in the United Church are known as “subordinate standards” because any statement of faith is understood to be subordinate to Scripture, Scripture being the United Church’s “primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life.”<sup>10</sup> Those who drafted the original Doctrine section of the Basis of Union assumed that the United Church, like other denominations in the Reformed tradition, would choose to add additional faith statements to its Statement of Doctrine from time to time. Indeed, adding “new” subordinate standards fit logically with their conviction that while there were certain “eternal verities” in the Christian faith tradition, the language in which those essential truths was expressed was time-bound and therefore those “verities” needed to be re-stated by each generation in the context of their time and circumstance. The framers of the Basis of Union understood that such re-stating or revising was a communal responsibility. United Church polity, with its requirement for a remit to change the Statement of Doctrine, reinforced this idea that such re-stating or revising was a responsibility of the whole church—no one minister or member could change or determine the faith of the entire church.

It has sometimes been asked whether a candidate needs to be in essential agreement with all four statements in the Statement of Doctrine, or only one of them, or only some but not all of them. Such inquiries reflect a misunderstanding of the nature of the Statement of Doctrine itself. Each of the four documents within the Statement of Doctrine represents an expression of the substance of the Christian faith, as understood and determined by the United Church, in the spirit and context of the time in which the particular document was written. The United Church has a clearly defined process for approving additions, deletions, and changes to its Doctrine. Unquestionably the language used in the various statements varies with the times in which the statements were written. Undoubtedly, the *1940 Statement of Faith*, reflecting the spirit of the age in which it was written, has a more restricted theological spectrum than either the original doctrine statement (i.e., the Preamble and the Twenty Articles) or *A Song of Faith*.

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<sup>10</sup> Basis of Union 2.3.0.

Unsurprisingly, *A Song of Faith*, written in the early twenty-first century, addresses issues (e.g., religious pluralism) that were not in the minds of those who drafted the original doctrine statement or the *1940 Statement of Faith*. There are points of theological tension within some of these statements and certainly some differences among the statements. That said, these statements collectively represent the United Church's particular understanding of the Christian tradition in which it stands, and of which it is a part. *Our Words of Faith*, the resource document for the three doctrine remits authorized by the 40<sup>th</sup> General Council (2009) addressed this very point:

One implication of acknowledging more than one subordinate standard is that the standards would be seen to be "in dialogue" with one another. For example, when presbyteries examine candidates for ministry to determine whether they are "in essential agreement with the statement of doctrine" (*The Manual* 026 (c)), both presbyteries and candidates would take into consideration all of the faith statements the United Church acknowledges as its formal doctrine.<sup>11</sup>

Essential agreement is a concept. It refers to the need of the committee examining a candidate to conclude that the candidate stands sufficiently within the faith tradition reflected in the Statement of Doctrine to be able to teach, preach, engage in outreach and pastoral care, and otherwise carry out the tasks of an authorized ministry in congruity with the tradition. Does the candidate understand the tradition? Can the candidate minister within it effectively and, with integrity, represent the tradition faithfully to those to whom the candidate will be offering leadership? The related question the examining committee also needs to consider, and to be able to answer affirmatively, is whether the candidate accepts the Statement of Doctrine "as being in substance, agreeable to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures."<sup>12</sup>

### **Why is Essential Agreement Important?**

Essential agreement with the Christian faith as expressed in the United Church's Statement of Doctrine is important because of the role ministry personnel take on in the life of the United Church. We ordain, commission, recognize, admit, or re-admit persons for authorized ministry in the United Church because we, as the United Church, have a particular story, the Christian story, to tell. That story is conveyed to others through educational activities, through services of worship, through the pastoral care delivered in and through communities of faith, and through the contacts and conversations that are part of ministries of outreach and service. United Church communities of faith invite ministry personnel into their midst to offer leadership in these areas. United Church ministry personnel have a primary responsibility in our communities of faith for educating and nurturing persons in the Christian faith. They take on such responsibilities so that the members of our communities of faith are able to understand the

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<sup>11</sup> *Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured, and Living* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2010), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Basis of Union, 13.2.

Christian tradition more fully and are enlivened and strengthened for the living out of their ministry in the wider world. Determining whether candidates for ministry are in essential agreement with the United Church's Statement of Faith is an effort to ensure that those who will carry out authorized ministry in the name of the United Church stand sufficiently within the faith tradition to be able to represent it faithfully, intelligibly, and with integrity.

### **Conclusion**

In The United Church of Canada, the committee examining persons entering ministry must be able to affirm that these persons are in "essential agreement" with the denomination's Statement of Doctrine and that they find that Statement of Doctrine to be, in substance, agreeable to the teachings of Scripture. Essential agreement is important to ensure that ministry personnel are able to represent, faithfully and with integrity, the historic Christian tradition in which the Church stands. However, there are two common misconceptions about "essential agreement:" the term is interpreted as meaning "literal agreement," or, in the opposite sense, as allowing both candidates for ministry and ministry personnel to espouse any belief while claiming to be in essential agreement. This background paper has shown that neither understanding accurately represents the intent of the framers of the Basis of Union, or what should be the practice in the final examination of candidates for ministry today.

Essential agreement has never meant literal agreement with every word of the Statement of Doctrine. At the same time, it has never implied that a candidate for ministry, or anyone in paid, accountable ministry, can profess theological views which represent a radical departure from the historic Christian tradition. Candidates for ministry must be able to say to the examining committee that they are in essential agreement. But such an assertion by a candidate is not sufficient. Essential agreement meant, and means, that as the examining committee reflects on a candidate's theological understandings, the committee can conclude that the candidate stands clearly within the Christian tradition, as The United Church of Canada has expressed that tradition in its Statement of Doctrine.