

## **TICIF ECCLESIOLOGY REPORT**

**Origin: The Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee**

### **A Church with Purpose: Towards an Ecclesiology for The United Church of Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

“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.” *A Song of Faith* 2006

These words from *A Song of Faith* represent the most recent articulation of the ecclesiology of The United Church of Canada. Ecclesiology can be defined as theological reflection on the nature and mission of the church – “a statement about where Christians are in the world, who

they sit with, and what they affirm and challenge.”<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiology is a practice through which “the church rethinks the meaning of its self-understanding as a community of Jesus Christ in every changing circumstance.”<sup>2</sup> Questions of ecclesiology often surface in times when the church and/or the society in which we minister are undergoing great change. Thus we are not alone in the struggle to understand and claim an identity and mission which is “timely and contextual.” Other denominations are asking these questions; they are also being addressed ecumenically through the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.<sup>3</sup> As *A Song of Faith* reminds us: “The church has not always lived up to its vision. It requires the Spirit to reorient it.”

In 2009, when the World Council of Churches invited member churches to respond to a Faith and Order Study on the Nature and Mission of the Church, the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee told the WCC that “these discussions have helped us to identify a need for work within our denomination that will lead to a more clear articulation of our own ecclesiology.” In the months since this response was submitted, and especially as people in various courts and committees have engaged in preparation for the 41<sup>st</sup> General Council, the urgency of such an articulation has been reiterated from many directions.

In 2009, the Task Group on Intercultural Ministries requested that work be done on the “core values” of the church. The Task Group request came from an awareness that the changes required by the church to fully embrace an intercultural vision must be considered in the context of what aspects of the identity of the church were non-negotiable, in other words, were core commitments around which an intercultural identity must be constructed. The Executive of General Council requested that the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee undertake this work. The Committee recognized that it was closely related to the ongoing study of ecclesiology.

The Permanent Committee on Programs documents, “A Justice Seeking/ Justice Living Church,” and the Intercultural Task Group report “Intercultural Ministries: Living into Transformation” offer a vision of the church as an intercultural, mutually transformative, equitable, justice-seeking and justice-living community. To do so is in itself an ecclesiological statement, but it demands also a deeper analysis of the connections between ecclesiology and ethics.

The experiences of community ministries, and questions of how to be about collaboration with partners in civil society, brought issues of ecclesiology to the fore in the Canadian partnerships review. The meaning of ministry of the whole people of God and the particular challenges of defining and sustaining creative and effective ministry leadership for the future can only be answered in the light of our understanding of the nature and mission of the church. Each of these

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Budden, *Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 133.

<sup>2</sup> Letty M. Russell, “Ecclesiology,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 78-79.

<sup>3</sup> Eg. *Called to Love and Praise: The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Experience and Practice*, Conference Statement of the British Methodist Church, 1999; World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005).

issues and numerous others present challenges and opportunities to name and claim the identity and mission of The United Church of Canada as one Christian denomination in God's world.

The United Church of Canada has great strengths: our faith, open to discipleship in Christ, rather than doctrinal rigidity; our pioneering work in "*whole world ecumenism*", and our ecumenical and inter-religious relationships which have emerged from our embracing of that envelope-pushing vision; our material resources, still considerable; and our heritage, determined still to "seek justice and resist evil." Nevertheless, in this century The United Church of Canada is facing new realities on every front.

We experience the world as increasingly plural. The motto of the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, "the world for Christ in our time" no longer reflects our understanding of the mission of the church. The religious reality of humanity is vibrant in myriad expressions, and the winds of the Spirit are sweeping cobwebs from every corner of the whole household of God. As a society we seek ways to build real respect and counter the barriers created by fear of those who are different. As a church we seek ways to open ourselves to transformation as truly intercultural communities also deeply engaged in interfaith dialogue and action.

Social commentators such as Reginald Bibby tell us that while religion continues as a force in Canada, the future for the "historic reformed churches" is uncertain.<sup>4</sup> Many who are young and alienated from a world of "political oppression, economic exploitation, and religious legitimization"<sup>5</sup> can find no relevance in organized faith communities, despite evidence of a search for spiritual nurture.

As we encounter these changes in the wider society, our interior life as a church is also in some turmoil. As membership and revenues fall and costs rise, we are challenged to maintain the integrated vision of stewardship represented by the Mission and Service Fund, and the struggle of diminished resources impacts every sphere of the church. In part, this funding crisis is linked to an apparent decrease in our sense of a common mission as a national denomination. At the same time, national courts and committees affirm the empowerment of congregations as the primary vehicle to engage in a mission and vision that is shared across the denomination. However, for many individuals and congregations, their primary identification is not with the national church, but with a locally engaged and funded mission and ministry, which may have only a peripheral relationship with the priorities, partnerships and policy decisions of the national denomination. The resulting disconnect leads to significant questions about what it means to claim membership in this national denomination: The United Church of Canada.

The challenges before us are also apparent in our structures and leadership. With fewer people to draw on, congregations, presbyteries and conferences struggle to find energy and commitment for the shared tasks of our conciliar structure. Courts of the church seem increasingly ill-informed as to their role, function and authority, and decisions appear to many to be made by default. Meetings which once offered a space for learning and community-building, as well as

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<sup>4</sup> Reginald Bibby, *Beyond the Gods and Back: Religion's Demise and Rise and Why it Matters* (Lethbridge, AB : Project Canada Books, 2011)

<sup>5</sup> Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: The Day-By-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco : HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

decision-making, have become shorter and less frequent. Questions are raised about the formation of future leadership (lay and ordered). What creative and empowering possibilities will be found for ministry in these changing contexts?

Some fear that The United Church of Canada is in danger of drifting into a church we do not recognize and do not wish to become. And yet, there is considerable evidence that there exists in parallel with these worrisome trends a strong core of people, experiences, attitudes, visions, and hope, with the potential to build a vibrant and faith-filled community into the future. In a variety of places – face to face or in social networks – people do gather to give expression to their understanding of what it means to be a church with purpose: Edge, More Franchises, Turn, Rendez-vous, Epiphany Explorations, Wonder Café, Behold!, Worship Matters, National Aboriginal Spiritual Gathering, Affirm United, Journeys of Black Peoples ... The recent identity survey shows the majority of respondents as long-term members with strong connection to the United Church, who are committed to offer time and resources to their local congregation, and to support the national and global work of the church.

It is the task of a study on ecclesiology to give shape to this potential, not by ignoring the dilemmas and fears, but by articulating key questions about what it means to be church in the present age; by pointing to resources in our heritage that can give guidance for the future; and by engaging with scripture, tradition and current scholarship to develop a theological grounding for the community of faith we are called to be for the sake of God's mission in our world today.

A challenge frequently offered The United Church of Canada is that we have no “theology.” Our response is that the United Church is not so much concerned with *having* a theology, but rather with *doing* theology.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, we are not persuaded that The United Church of Canada, in these early years of the twenty-first century requires a *new* ecclesiology, but rather to *live* the ecclesiology in which it was founded, is grounded and in which it continues to evolve. However, we are of one mind that it is important to articulate our ecclesiology in every generation. Idioms change. Circumstances evolve. People forget. Therefore, we offer this document as a tool for “memory, dreams and reflections.”<sup>7</sup> It is not intended as the final product of our work on ecclesiology.

Our starting point for this report has been The United Church's four “statements of faith.” Each statement articulates an ecclesiology for the generation from which it emerged and to which it spoke: The Basis of Union, 1925; Statement of Faith, 1940; A New Creed, 1969; and A Song of Faith, 2006.

We have discerned five themes arising from these statements of faith:

1. The church is not ours but God's through Christ.
2. The United Church of Canada is governed by scripture and secondly by contextually expressed doctrine.
3. The United Church of Canada is an expression of universal church.

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<sup>6</sup> See Michael Bourgeois, “Awash in Theology: Issues in Theology in The United Church of Canada” in *The United Church of Canada : A History* ed. Don Schweitzer (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffé. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973, Rev. ed.)

4. All ecclesiology in The United Church of Canada is provisional.
5. The United Church of Canada seeks to act in solidarity with God's mission which is greater than the church and includes people of other faiths and no specific faith.

Attending to these themes, and guided by the principles of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral,"<sup>8</sup> we have wrestled with Scripture, searched our history, recalled our tradition and employed our reason to weave several stories of who we are as a church: a narrative ecclesiology.

*Let us tell you about . . . us . . .*

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**Let us tell you a story about a church that is a community willing to follow Christ into the unknown and uncertain, no matter how afraid we are.**

### **The Biblical Story**

#### **Matthew 14: 22-33 Jesus walks on the water – with Peter.**

After feeding a great crowd with but 5 loaves and 2 fish, Jesus sends his disciples off on the seas of Galilee. Using his authority, he dismisses the crowd; retires to a mountaintop to pray and as dawn breaks, walks across the sea to his friends in their storm tossed boat. Afraid of this apparition, they cry out. Jesus answers and Peter asks for permission to join Jesus on the water. He joins Jesus, but faith deserts him and he is upheld from the depths only by the touch of Jesus' hand. Peter and Jesus climb into the boat.

#### **Philippians 2:1-13 God incarnate.**

The first Christians were convinced that in Jesus they had met the God of Israel in the flesh - as one of them. Paul recounts an already established tradition in the shape of a hymn: that Jesus, one with God, has poured himself into a human vessel that we might be confident of God's love for us, and reminds his readers that in the same way God is in us through Christ, working in us to achieve our redemption.

#### **John 18: 10-11 Jesus is arrested in the garden of Gethsemane.**

When the temple authorities and Syrian irregulars arrive to arrest Jesus, Peter draws a short sword and shears off the ear of Malchus, a servant of the High Priest. But Jesus heals Malchus' wound and rebukes Peter, observing that if defence was the order of the day, God would have sent 12,000 angels to his rescue.

#### **A church that tells these stories looks like:**

When Ken Gallinger, long-time minister, writer and broadcaster tells this story he reminds his listeners that the heady moment on the waves with Jesus was a promise of things to come, not a pattern for daily life. Peter and Jesus get back into the leaky, storm battered little fishing boat for, frail and imperfect as the boat was and as the Christian church is, yet still the church is one of the vessels God chooses to fulfill God's mission, and our place is aboard.

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<sup>8</sup> The Wesleyan Quadrilateral refers to John Wesley's model for understanding religious authority, which affirms the interdependence of scripture, tradition, reason and experience for engaging in theological reflection.

The Very Reverend Bill Phipps was accused by the editorial board of the Ottawa Citizen in the autumn of 1997 of having denied the divinity of Christ. What the moderator professed, echoing Philippians, was that in Jesus, we see all of God that may be poured into a human being.

The late Katharine Hockin, United Church missionary and theologian, when reminded of Jesus' arrest and how we are not meant to defend Jesus, but to follow him, observed that we are to follow Jesus into dialogue with the other and with the whole world.

*A Song of Faith* testifies to our understanding of Jesus as the one in whose "life, teaching, and self-offering, God empowers us to live in love." Affirming that the Risen Christ is "present to us and the source of our hope," we celebrate Jesus as the "transformation of our lives" and seek to be a church continuing his story and embodying Christ's presence in the world.

A church that tells these stories does not hold Christology – the doctrine of Christ – to be a static description; but rather a living and vital relationship with the risen Christ. For it is through Christ that Christians have come to know the God of Israel, and to be a vessel put to the service of God's mission, leaving safe harbours and venturing into the deep and uncharted waters of the future.

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**Let us tell you a story about a church unafraid of heartbreak, confession, humility and transformation.**

### **The Biblical Story**

#### **Mark 7:24-31, Matthew 15: 21-28**

A Syrophenician (Canaanite) woman, a Gentile, a woman of another culture and another faith, approaches and challenges Jesus on the rules about social status inherent in his teaching. He listens, with grace and humility and in some translations, humour. He is transformed in that moment by that challenge and acts in God's mission, not limited by the social structure of his time, to include the "other." The woman leaves, there is no further mention of her, other than the report that she received God's grace. The story is not about the woman – it does not matter if she says thank you or converts to his teachings – the story is about the challenge by the other and the transformation of all the participants through God's grace.

#### **A church that tells this story looks like:**

Rev. Neil Wallace recalls a night during "the Oka Crisis" in the summer of 1990 when "a group of ministers from different denominations waited for clearance from the military to proceed to Oka, and cross the military and Native check-points to meet with the Warriors behind the barricades. From the beginning of the crisis, The United Church of Canada was present in both Kanasatake and Kanawake because our church has a congregation in each of these Native communities. Among those waiting on this particular night was the newly-elected Moderator, the Right Rev. Walter Farquharson. "I remember going through the different check-points and body searches and finally arriving at the Warrior command post. One of the Warrior leaders gave us some instructions about what we should do if army and Mohawks exchanged gunfire. How does one describe or process such a moment? In so many ways it seemed surreal. Yet, somewhere

deep within me, I knew that this is where we needed to be as a church ... on the dangerous side of the barricade.”

In 1986, responding with rigorous honesty to the challenge of a group previously viewed as the “other”, the United Church was transformed and, operating in grace and humility, offered an Apology to First Nations Peoples. The Apology was acknowledged but not accepted. In 1998 a further and more specific apology was offered with regard to the United Church’s complicity with residential schools. This story is not about the First Nations People alone....it is about a church that was transformed and learned patience and the need for action in areas of social justice and not just words. This is the nature of our church.

In 2008 a General Council Task Group on Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Spiritualities produced a dialogue planning tool, *Circle and Cross* – a hands-on, meant-to-be-used tool for congregations and congregants of the United Church to explore their ability to deeply listen and be rigorously honest, humble and graceful in attempting to transform in response to the challenge of the “other.”

A church that tells this story continues to accept that ecclesiology is fluid and changing, expresses the universal Church and seeks transformation above and beyond acceptance or tolerance of the other. A church that looks like this is not bound by present-day status or convention. A church that tells this story sees sin as corporate as well as individual. Therefore, in the face of sin, believers must **act** as members of a whole community as well as individually. Sin is defined fundamentally as *a breaking of relationship with God and with one another*.

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**Let us tell you a story about a church honouring the plurality of creation, accepting it as gift, responding differently but faithfully.**

### **The Biblical Story**

#### **Ephesians 1:5-4:6**

A Christian intercultural congregation is being addressed. They are seeking new ways to be community together that honour their many differences. They bring with them their understanding and experiences of in-group, out-group dynamics, their values, their memories, their resistances. They hear they are adopted as God’s children. They hear the Apostle Paul declaring them fellow citizens with all other believers and members of God’s household.

Due to the socio-cultural situation in Ephesus, some members have lost their social connections and status. Paul reminds them that they are never lost in Christ. They are building in a new way, bringing their past and present wisdom. Together, in faith, hope and love they will build a “holy temple.”

#### **Galatians 3:27-28**

Yet another congregation is coping with diverse perspectives. Here the Spirit of Christ is given priority over their oppositional, in-group/out-group, powerful/powerless, dominant/subordinate understanding of relationships. Paul reminds them of their new situation as baptized persons who are called to live in deeper spiritual understanding with regard to human relations, patterns

of interaction, attitudes and behaviour. The former ways are no longer acceptable. There is now a shared world with a new moral vision.

**A church that tells these stories looks like:**

While working on a theological statement, members of the church's Ethnic Ministries Task Group told stories that included experiences of racism, cultural and religious imperialism, being excluded from leadership, property and resources, and pressure toward assimilation, segregation, and rejection. During the 1970's and '80's closer attention to the needs and struggles of ethnic minority congregations led to the development of the Ethnic Ministries Working Unit. "That All May Be One: Policy Statement on Anti-Racism" was presented to the 38th General Council in 2000. It named racism as a sin present in our society and in our church, and called the church to organize for diversity with resources and programs supporting work toward racial justice. The statement was offered as a "basis for the creation of a church where all are welcome, where all feel welcome, and where diversity is as natural as breathing."

The 39<sup>th</sup> General Council of The United Church of Canada (2006) committed itself to "becoming an intercultural church... where there is mutually respectful diversity and full and equitable participation of all Aboriginal, Francophone, ethnic minority, and ethnic majority constituencies in the total life, mission, and practices of the whole church." Seven touchstones developed by the Task Group on Intercultural Ministries inform the implementation of this affirmation.

Recognizing that *God makes all things new*, an intercultural church honours both the generational histories of Canadian immigration and the birth histories of individuals. The United Church accepts diverse Christian expressions and interpretations brought from "homeland" churches to Canada. Further, it remains pastorally sensitive to the fact that new Canadians sometimes experience "double colonization:" some have been victimized by colonizers in their country of origin and now live in a land that was also colonized. A church that hears this story shares their pain in solidarity and walks with them on the road to reconciliation and transformation.

Affirming *the ongoing inspiration of scripture*, an intercultural church uplifts an intercultural interpretation of scripture and its method. Remembering that we are created in the image of God, an intercultural church upholds *the inherent, God-created equality of all*. Mutual regard is embedded in the church's understanding of God's identity, character and intervening action. This church humbly remembers the words it spoke during the first apology to Aboriginal peoples in Canada – "we tried to make you in our image." Understanding Canadian intercultural histories, and United Church intercultural realities, it trains its leaders to think, interpret and act interculturally.

An intercultural church discovers *the living presence of Jesus of Nazareth among us*, while acknowledging his Jewish identity and cultural context. Through him all Christians begin their intercultural relationship. Affirming that *the Holy Spirit animates all of life*, this church builds a new table for communion in the Spirit. Culturally diverse Christians gathered around it are commissioned to bear witness in a pluralistic Canadian context. As at Pentecost, no one is required to give up their cultural identity or language; rather, individual identities are left in place but unified in a larger expression of humanity.

An intercultural church seeks to live as *a people gathered by the Spirit, together in grace and brokenness, giving witness to the hope that is in us*. It is diverse and interdependent, valuing the spiritual wisdom of all members and adherents. Honouring God's grace within them, the church leads its members beyond mere "tolerance" towards the grace of mutual "respect." It highlights global partnerships which expand our perceptions of created diversity through dialogue and action. *The realms of intercultural reality, both seen and unseen*, are manifested at God's table. Bread is broken. Our eyes are opened – Christ is with us!

A church shaped by these touchstones knows God's creating and transforming action as pluralistic and intercultural. Within the United Church's ethos of justice, what is good for human welfare will now be interpreted interculturally. This church is self-critical about history and the power dynamics among us, recognizing that difference in our society and church continues to mean inequities in wealth and power. The church challenges this injustice and works to build right relations that uphold the beauty and dignity of difference, which is cherished as a resource for learning, wisdom and transformation.

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**Let us tell you a story about a church mending the world together with other households of faith.**

### **The Biblical Story**

**Psalm 24:1** "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and they who dwell therein." "We hold that the world is at the centre of God's concern....God works at the beginning and the ending of each day for the mending of creation." (*Mending the World*)

**Acts 17:26-27** God made from one every nation of humankind.... that they should seek God. In Athens, Paul encountered many people of a faith other than the one he professed. Instead of rejecting them, he intentionally engaged them by learning what their faith was about and offered a new perspective on the universal God, creator of all.

### **A church that tells these stories looks like:**

People of different faiths formed the Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education and Action in 1995. United Church people came together with people from other faiths and denominations to form this centre. It has worked with the city of Edmonton to initiate ceremonies, events and actions to celebrate and bring together people of the different faith communities.

United Church people together with other Canadian faith leaders wrote a *Canadian Interfaith Call for Leadership and Action on Climate Change*. It was presented to the government of Canada prior to the 17th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP17) in South Africa in December 2011.

In the Middle East the United Church has been working with Palestinian – both Muslim and Christian – and Jewish groups to promote peace through justice. Partners, including the Jerusalem Center for Women and Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, offer leadership in understanding the history and impact of the Occupation on all faith communities in

the region, and guidance for United Church members seeking to act in solidarity with people in the Middle East.

Since 1936 the United Church has been committed to living respectfully with people of different religions. In 1966 the Report of the Commission on World Mission stated that “God is creatively and redemptively at work in the religious life of all mankind (sic).” This denomination-shaping statement has led the United Church to an irrevocable commitment to interfaith dialogue and action. This commitment has been expressed in the documents: *Mending the World: An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation*; *Bearing Faithful Witness: Jewish – United Church Relations Today*; and *That We May Know Each Other: Muslim – United Church Relations Today*.

*Mending the World* affirms that the United Church participates in whole world ecumenism which “makes common cause with individuals and institutions of good will who are committed to compassion, peace and justice in the world.” ClaimING both the integrity of its own identity and the importance of relationship with “the other” (who are also God’s own), the church is committed to grow in self-understanding through closer dialogue with, openness to and respect for other religions. The United Church is challenged to join with people of different faiths in exploring new ways of understanding each other for the sake of the well-being of our world.

In *Bearing Faithful Witness*, the United Church acknowledged a history of anti-Judaism in Christian biblical interpretation, theology and action and affirms the significance of Judaism as at once a religion, a people, and a covenant community. In *That We May Know Each Other*, the church acknowledged a history of hostility and misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims and recognized Islam as in essence a religion of peace, mercy, justice, and compassion. In both these documents members of the United Church are urged to join with neighbours of different faiths to seek justice and resist evil for the sake of mending the world.

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**Let us tell you a story about a church that participates in God’s mission as part of a global neighbourhood of justice-seeking friends.**

### **Biblical Story**

#### **Isaiah 58:6-9, Acts 2:44-45**

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that acts of justice done in partnership will bring about healing for all. The acts of praise God chooses for the sake of mending the world are to loose bonds of injustice, to break yokes of oppression, to bring liberation, and to share resources toward ending poverty, hunger and homelessness. The book of Acts records the efforts of the early church to live from this vision:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

#### **A church that tells these stories looks like:**

In June 2008, more than 60 representatives of The United Church of Canada, global partners from 15 countries, and sister churches and other organizations in Canada, gathered for a consultation on partnership for God’s mission in the world today. The context for their

deliberations was empire – the interconnected systems and forces of domination that oppress people and threaten all of creation. As participants shared stories of the impact of empire in their contexts, and responded to policy proposals coming from the United Church’s Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations (now Partners in Mission) Unit, they also demonstrated the solidarity of partnership in the process of the meeting. Visits to sites of justice work in Toronto invited mutual sharing of experience and insight. During the meeting, participants reached out to partners in Zimbabwe, with a letter offering prayers for the resolution of the country’s political and economic crisis, after the arrest of several Student Christian Movement leaders. Reflecting on the resistance struggles of people around the world, Ajit Muricken of Vikas Adhyayan Kendra in India said: “When you think of the pain and suffering of others, take it as your own. We must stand in partnership with people who are in the field.”

For many years The United Church of Canada has affirmed participation in God’s mission in the world as “partnership.” While early expressions of mission focused primarily on the sending of personnel to serve social, medical, education and religious needs of people overseas, a more recent focus on sharing financial resources is now placed in the context of an emphasis on working *with* partners struggling for systemic justice and social transformation.

A 1988 statement spoke of partnership as “becoming involved with others in God’s mission for wholeness of life especially on behalf of the poor and powerless. “It affirmed that “partnership brings people together in community for mutual empowerment through the sharing of gifts, recognized as gifts freely given by God for the benefit of all, not possessions which some may control. We need the gifts our partners can share with us.” In 2008, after an in-depth review of partnership in the context of empire, the General Council Executive approved a “Statement and Affirmations on Global Partnership,” with 10 guiding principles. These included the affirmation that right relations are at the heart of God’s mission, that global partnerships are lived expressions of right relationships, and that God’s mission is meant to be undertaken in partnership. The principles also call for resistance to principalities and powers, humility and critical self-reflection, upholding both justice and charity, resource-sharing that reflects a commitment to shared power and a commitment to ecological justice. Partnership involves the whole church, as well as relationships with people of other faiths and beliefs.

Currently, the church is reviewing partnership in the Canadian context. The report from this review offers principles for the practice of partnership in Canada. These include the call to an incarnational ministry that involves the whole church. Such partnerships require a willingness to risk, and to confront with courage, principalities and powers. Imaging Jesus as a border-walker, the review pictures the church as a place of intersection where we are challenged to collaborate with diverse people and communities for the sake of justice, healing and wholeness.

A church that tells this story holds practices of right relation, partnership and mending the world as fundamental to its participation in God’s mission. This church is open to being challenged, inspired and transformed by partnerships with those in Canada and overseas who live closer to the margins of empire. It understands itself as part of an interdependent web of life-in-relation, valuing mutuality, accountability, advocacy, and the sharing resources and information.

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**Let us tell you a story about a church seeking to live in but not of the world of empire and to participate in an economy of grace.**

### **Biblical Story**

**Romans 12:2** Be not of the world but in it...but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. In the midst of the Roman Empire early Christian communities, scattered, if not already underground, grasped the summons to steadfast faithfulness, and “faithful public witness.” No doubt, this was risk-filled, and as more than one guerrilla leader has cautioned, constant vigilance and constant mistrust of authorities was necessary. Kasemann notes that: “service of creation and conformity to the world are not same thing... To ask what pleases God ... stands dialectically opposed both to the idolizing of the world and to its despising, both to seeking the world and fleeing it.”<sup>9</sup> As the church engages with the world, it is also being transformed. Such a transformation is to “be enlarged in your vision and affections, so that you might better discern what the divine governance enables and requires you to be and to do, what are your appropriate relations to God.”<sup>10</sup>

**Mark 8: 1-10** Jesus is speaking to a crowd of 4000 gathered over mealtime. It becomes apparent that there is not enough food, 7 loaves and a few fishes. Miraculously, after the blessing the crowd is fed, with food to spare. A church that believes in the economy of grace recognises that in the grace of Jesus there was abundance, the 4000 fed each other, shared in their wealth, and all were satisfied.

### **The church that tells these stories looks like:**

During the fall of 2011 people around the world raised a cry of resistance against the inequities of wealth and power that are the effects of empire today, as they were in Jesus’ time. For some Christians, participation in the Occupy movement was a way of living faithfully in the midst of empire. In Toronto, United Church members became part of a group of Occupy chaplains, and offered a weekly vigil that included communion, recalling these words by past Moderator David Giuliano on the radical grace of the sacraments: “When we celebrate communion we join in challenging an empire of exclusion. In the midst of a world that values some lives more than others, where some are hungry while others eat, where some have places of honour and others places of shame, we enact a table where all are cherished and fed. Communion is a Christian response to empire. We do it in remembrance of One who came practising a feast and world of open commensality.”<sup>11</sup>

The document “Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire” (2006) calls upon us to examine our participation in the market economy and to act in revolutionary ways to counter its pervasive and insidious claim on power and substance in this world. The document draws on the 2001

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<sup>9</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 331.

<sup>10</sup> James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Vol. 1: "Theology and Ethics" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 327f.

<sup>11</sup> David Giuliano, “Declaring our Citizenship: Through Baptism and Communion We Model the Alternative Empire of God,” *Mandate*, Special Edition, May 2007, 17.

statement, “To Seek Justice and Resist Evil”: Towards a Global Economy for All God’s People” and comes out of the United Church’s longstanding commitment to, and history of working for, social justice.

As a result of the Empire report, congregations have been invited into a “Covenant for Life in Creation.” The covenant calls for participation in an economy of grace, celebrating abundance, mutuality, and equitable distribution of wealth. “We embrace God’s reign of liberation and compassion [in] how we make decisions as a community, [in] how we share the gifts and resources we have been given, [in] how we share our faith among ourselves with adults children and youth, [in] how we live out God’s good news in the world.”

A church that is “in the world but not of the world” – a world co-opted by the market economy – is marginal and revolutionary. It is committed “to choose life and resist empire, to create sustainable alternatives for the common good, to form wholistic relationships and communities of joy and justice, to enact daring discipleship and mutuality on the sacred earth.” A church willing to call from within and without the margins of empire follows Jesus’ call to create radically faithful communities, especially in the market place.

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### **Let us tell you a story about a church reflecting on ecclesiology as part of a global family of churches**

In response to the World Council of Churches Study on the Nature and Mission of the Church, the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee wrote: “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.”

The stories we have told reflect and enlarge upon themes that have emerged in our statements of faith and bring out other ways of thinking about being church. In every age and often at points of apparent crisis in the existence of the church, theologians have offered insights that might provoke among Christians both recall of the stories and traditions of the Christian community, and discernment toward new ways of being church in the world. We offer just a sampling of that work as an invitation into a further process of interpreting our stories. Included are both voices that have shaped theology from the experience of the European tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as newer voices challenging us to a wider view of church through perspectives of those who have often spoken from the margins.

The theologies and understandings of the church presented by scholars will always reflect their own identities, cultural contexts and political interests.<sup>12</sup> As we read these voices of theological reflection, as we appreciate the images they evoke, we are encouraged to ask: *Do these theologies resonate with the church we see in local congregations, and in our regional and national structures? Is this a model of church that empowers us to continue our stories of*

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<sup>12</sup> Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd, “Church of the Margins: A Call to Solidarity,” in *Intersecting Voices: Critical Theologies in a Land of Diversity*, ed. Don Schweitzer and Derek Simon (Ottawa: Novalis, St. Paul University, 2004), 138.

*seeking justice, resisting evil, and living with respect in creation? What guidance do these images of church offer for our practices of faith? Can these theologies help to bring the vision from our stories into every dimension of our church life, from prayer, to advocacy, to governance?*

The need to articulate theology arises in the context of particular historical conditions. The devastations of World War II brought a search for a church that could still stand with the world.<sup>13</sup> This search led eventually to an emphasis on the church as community, with shared responsibility for theology. The communion of saints that offer themselves in ministry to the word of God recognizes the place of theology as “very concretely in the *community* not somewhere in empty space.” The implication is that a community that knows its task is to participate in God’s mission in the world will be “theologically interested” – a community also engaging in study and reflection, probing the relationship between faith and action.<sup>14</sup>

Other interpretations of ecclesiology have focussed on the actions of the Christian community. “The church is present wherever ‘the manifestation of the Spirit’ (I Cor. 12.7) takes place. ... Thus the whole being of the church is marked by participation in the history of God’s dealings with the world.”<sup>15</sup> Recalling the historical marks of the church – one, holy, apostolic, catholic – gives rise to a set of questions which are vital to ecclesiology for a church seeking to live faithfully in the midst of empire: “Is not the Christ proclaimed in the church the one who preaches the gospel to the poor? Is not the Christ of its Eucharist also the brother of the one who is persecuted outside the church? What form is to be taken by Christ in the church in a world of hostility? ... Is the situation in which the church finds itself in this society not bound to stamp it with the signs of poverty, suffering, liberation and partisanship?”<sup>16</sup>

In recent years contributions to theologies of Christian community (ecclesiology) have come from an increasingly diverse range of voices and experiences, including intercultural, interfaith and liberation perspectives. From these perspectives come new interpretations of the traditional marks of the church, as well as additional ways of naming the characteristics of a church living out God’s mission in the world today. Much recent theology lifts up women’s voices, reminding us of the role of women in nurturing, sustaining, teaching and leading the early church (and indeed also recalling the stories of women in Israel’s history). The work of feminist theology and ethics re-imagines Christian community using criteria of embodiment, moral agency, relationality and diversity.

From this perspective Christian community seeks to embody the love of God in care for concrete and particular bodies who are suffering and seeking justice. A theology of embodiment claims erotic energy as a creative resource for response to the world.<sup>17</sup> The gifts of embodiment will be

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings 1946-5*, trans. S. Godman, (London: SCM Press, 1954), 72.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, trans. Grover Foley, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, [1st ed.]), 37, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Harper & Row, 1975), 65.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>17</sup> “The erotic connects us to the sacred. ... Fostering flourishing and right relationship is the enactment of grace, of eros.” Pamela Dickey Young, *Re-creating the Church: Communities of Eros* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 35, 85.

celebrated in art, music, movement, food, honouring all sorts of bodies with diverse sexualities, abilities, gender and racial identities. Concrete acts of public responsibility—moving our bodies to sites of struggle in practices of solidarity—witness to Christian community embodied in and for the world.

Moral agency means calling forth the gifts and participation of each person, recognizing their dignity and worth. However, moral agency is not simply *individual* freedom to decide and to act. People are formed in relationship and true freedom for Christians involves solidarity with the oppressed. Churches that have represented dominant social power are called to a ministry of “accountability and resistance” with those at the margins. Such ministry begins by discovering within our own diversities “insights into the complexity of privilege and marginalization.”<sup>18</sup> Often envisioned as a “discipleship of equals,” this model of church emphasizes practices of dialogue and service, particularly with the poor and oppressed. The church does not hold all truth but is open to the gifts and wisdom of each individual, culture, and context.<sup>19</sup>

A relational ecclesiology values mutuality and interdependence in all creation, and confirms that “human moral power flows *primarily* from deep communion between God, human creatures, and the broader community of life.”<sup>20</sup> God is named as power-in-relation and the Trinity as a model of relationality. This implies that the role of the church includes the moral formation of its members for living into right relations.<sup>21</sup> Individuals and community are supported to participate in networks and movements working for local and global justice. Restoring right relation is therefore key to understanding ministry and mission. This requires a willingness to deal with the risks and challenges of creating relationships across boundaries of difference, within and among communities.

Commitment to relationship across diversities presents the challenge of creating communities that expect and honour differences. At the same time, we need communities that are prepared to struggle with the ways that the differences among us are reflected in structures of domination and subordination. This means that community is not achieved simply by “including” everyone in an unchanging church, but involves grappling with the relations of power among us in a dynamic faith community. An intercultural church intentionally honours difference, works to transform relations that exclude, and is committed to learn from and be changed by those who have been seen as “other.” When difference is recognized as “necessary to truth and goodness,”<sup>22</sup> differences become a resource of energy, alternative visions of reality, and ways of moving beyond binary thinking into models of multiplicity, mutuality and dialogue.

Societal structures create spaces of exclusion and marginalization. Ministries seeking to be open and intentionally engage with marginality are invited to honour the already-existing differences within their own community, while also acknowledging their own places of privilege and

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<sup>18</sup> MacKenzie Shepherd, “Church of the Margins,” 142.

<sup>19</sup> María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1993), 169-170.

<sup>20</sup> Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2002), 103.

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*, 102-109; Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 101-171; Young, *Re-creating the Church*, 125-135.

<sup>22</sup> Gloria Albrecht, *The Character of Our Communities: Towards an Ethic of Liberation for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 159.

marginalization. Exploration of cultural and denominational history and its impact on others is also important. Finally, congregations are encouraged to articulate and claim the faith that moves them to become justice-seeking communities.<sup>23</sup>

As discussion of ecclesiology in The United Church of Canada continues, further reflection on the relationship of congregation and denomination in the mission and ministry of the church is needed. In the conciliar structure of the United Church, local, regional and national structures can be understood as “mediating structures,” supporting each other in a mission of social transformation. Through these structures, individuals and networks are empowered for ministry locally, and linked to national processes of policy formation, advocacy and building global networks.<sup>24</sup>

The following are some of the questions that invite further reflection on ecclesiology for The United Church of Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*For the United Church today, what are the specific questions and issues presented by visions of church as embodied, empowering, relational and diverse?*

*What are the challenges to building communities that are theologically interested and active participants in God’s mission?*

*What are the dilemmas in structures, values, ministries, resources that must be addressed in continuing discussions of ecclesiology?*

*What sources in our history and tradition need to be taken into account, preserved or transformed? What next steps should be undertaken?*

*Can the ecclesiology emerging in the stories and reflections offered here provide guidance for the decisions before us at the present time?*

Re-imagining community calls regional and national structures as well as local congregations into new ways of living our ecclesiology. God calls us through Christ to create spaces of possibility where all people without distinction (Galatians 3) can join to give life to this radically inclusive vision. To do so invites thorough examination of the ways that church life continues to be constructed for exclusion by hierarchical theologies, binary thinking and relations of domination and subordination. Re-imagining urges us to explore theologies which support multiple ways of articulating faith and diverse ways of interpreting scripture and tradition. Commitment to partnership and solidarity includes both public witness and ecumenical practice that places a priority on locally embodied, globally connected commitments to justice and social transformation. We are invited to be a church of faith and struggle, hospitality and risk, and creative and critical renewal of tradition, reflecting the pluralistic and multi-textured contexts of our lives.

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<sup>23</sup> MacKenzie Shepherd, “Church of the Margins,” 147-148.

<sup>24</sup> Roger Hutchinson, “Foreword,” in Shirley Farlinger, *A Million for Peace: The Story of the Peacemaking Fund of The United Church of Canada* (Toronto, United Church Publishing House, 1995) ix-xiii.

## **Theological Principles**

Attending to the ethos and vision that has been expressed and lived out in our statements, policies and actions, and the stories they tell, can be a source of wisdom and guidance. The following theological principles emerge from the stories we have told as a church. Revealed in these principles are the core values that we hold as a church – values which shape our identity and the character of our relationships. We believe that they can help us to reflect on fundamental issues and make decisions, in the next months and as the church moves into the future:

- A church that holds scripture as foundational remembers the wealth of stories and teachings collected in scripture and in the continuing tradition.
- A church that is called into being as the body of Christ recognizes that those who come to the church, come through the invitation of Christ, and must be welcomed with the radical hospitality of the reign of God.
- A church seeking justice and resisting evil knows itself, confesses and repents its errors, serves with humility and acts with courage.
- A church that lives with respect in creation asks how all of its decisions will affect the flourishing of creation.
- A church that is part of God's mission in the world asks how each of its decisions will promote or obstruct God's mission.
- A church seeking equity and justice honours the diverse experiences of those who we may have seen as "other," but who are never other to God.
- An intercultural church intentionally risks engagement with difference as a God-given gift, affirming the human dignity of all.
- A church open to transformation through relationship with others is committed to dialogue.
- A church which values partnership and whole world ecumenism seeks out collaboration with people beyond our church in areas of common concern.
- A church living faithfully in the midst of empire makes its decisions with the full and informed participation of all those affected.