

# THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF COVENANTING CONGREGATIONS

within the United Church of Canada  
Corporation # 277932-3-M

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## An Inconvenient Remit?

November, 2008

Dear Commissioner:

As you are probably aware, former Moderator Lois Wilson has criticized the 39<sup>th</sup> General Council for approving deep cuts to the UCC's programs for social justice. In her letter to the Executive of General Council she says,

- "I think we are experiencing a failure in governance and suffering the results of a seriously flawed process at General Council."
- "Moreover, the entire process was strictly controlled, although it gave the appearance of inclusion and consultation." (Oct. 14, 2007)

This is to advise you that the NACC believes those two statements also apply to the Court's adoption of "A Song of Faith". However, we also believe many, perhaps most, Commissioners are still probably unaware that they were involved in the approval of improper amendments to the denomination's formally stated faith.

The NACC has attempted to persuade senior church authorities that "A Song" contains serious changes in church doctrine, and, under the provisions of Basis 8.6.2(1) should therefore not be approved by a General Council without a Remit. To make this point, and after carefully comparing "A Song" with the "Articles of Faith" in the *Basis of Union*, the NACC identified four changes that are illustrative of its case. They deal with: (1) The Lordship of Christ, (2) The Trinitarian Name(s) of God, (3) The role, importance, and reliability of Scripture, and (4) Jesus as the Truth of God. The General Secretary was asked to rule whether, based on this evidence, the General Council had erred in not submitting "A Song" to Remit. Her response was that a Remit was not required. No reasons were provided for that Ruling.

Consequently, the Alliance took the next step, which was to appeal to the Judicial Committee of General Council. In her turn, the General Secretary recommended a Hearing not be granted. Her written recommendation was bulky, weighing in at over 4 lbs. Taking issue with significant elements therein, the NACC offered a carefully argued (ten-page) commentary of rebuttal and clarification. (Copies of the NACC's two submissions are available from the NACC Office, [nacc@csolve.net](mailto:nacc@csolve.net), 1-800-678-2607,

Box 237, Barrie ON L4M 4T2. Presumably the General Secretary's office will be prepared to provide copies of her recommendation.)

In the event, the Executive of the Judicial Committee accepted the General Secretary's recommendation and refused a Hearing. Here again, no explanation was offered, and a written request for the rationale for the refusal, when finally received, offered nothing helpful. Accepting that the NACC could now expect little in way of meaningful assistance, it still felt it proper to offer the Judicial Committee Executive the following as an example of how decisions from central office sometimes leave people perplexed:

You will recall that, in support of our cause, we cited a Judicial Committee decision from 2000. In that instance, the Hearing Panel upheld our Appeal for a Remit before the alternative baptismal formulae proposed for *Celebrate God's Presence* could be accepted. Then (as here too), proposed alternatives to the Trinitarian Name of God were a core issue, since the proposed wordings formally opened the door to the apostasy of "Mother Goddess" worship and to the third century heresy of Modalism. We had expected that the Judicial Committee's Executive would accept its own Panel's 2000 decision as establishing a precedent for a Hearing on the need for a Remit on "A Song of Faith". That the present Executive remained unconvinced of this is a surprise to us. Until an explanation is forthcoming, we will remain puzzled.

Having effectively exhausted its procedural options, the NACC has therefore decided to bring the matter to Commissioners' attention in this Open Letter, somewhat unconventional though that step may be.

What the NACC has argued doctrinally, i.e. under Basis 8.6.2(1), is just one element in the equation. Another is provided by the *Record of Proceedings (2006)*, pp 419-485 ("Report of the Committee on Theology and Faith), which demonstrates that the involvement of the wider church in the development of "A Song" has been extremely thin.

As noted in the Committee on Theology and Faith's own Report, there were three distinct steps leading to the adoption of "A Song": these were (1) Faith Talk, the introductory and very general questionnaire; (2) Faith Talk II, which placed a draft faith statement before the church; and (3) consideration of the revised (and final) version by the 39<sup>th</sup> General Council.

In its Report the Committee is silent on the level of participation in the first step, Faith Talk. However, it states that Faith Talk II, the second step, generated 124 congregational responses. Comment: According to the UCC Yearbook (2005, the relevant year), the UCC at the time had 3,473 "preaching places and congregations". That number yields a congregational response rate of only 3.5%. Hardly evidence of serious church-wide engagement.

Finally, there was the third step, consideration and action by the General Council itself, where the *Record of Proceedings 2006* reports attendance by 382 Commissioners.

Comment: Given the 3.5% figure for congregational response, it is hard to believe many of the 382 Commissioners profited from being part of careful local studies of “A Song”. Moreover, even if every Commissioner had engaged in careful personal study, as individuals they would still represent only 0.07% of the UCC’s membership in 2006.

These extremely low levels of engagement with “A Song” do not seem to fit with the 37<sup>th</sup> General Council’s charge to the Committee on Theology and Faith “to produce the draft of a timely and contextual statement of faith, with a view to circulation throughout the *whole church for study and response*, (emphasis added).” Such a low response rate could be attributed to various factors, including poor publicity, daunting documents, lack of interest or of felt need for a new faith statement, and so on. (Indeed, Commissioners may recall two Proposals – LON 2 and M&O 11 - that suggested there had been a dearth of grassroots input. In effect, both asked for delay, so as to facilitate greater congregational consultation and input. In both cases the Court’s decision was to “Take no action”.)

The NACC’s argument for a *post hoc* Remit is based firstly on the doctrinal implications of “A Song”, presented to the General Secretary and Judicial Committee. The second argument rests on the extremely low level of grassroots input. To us, the need for setting the statement aside pending a Remit seems indisputable.

Why might such an unusual step be warranted? To return to Lois Wilson’s letter, which concludes with, “The UCC has lost many on the ‘right’ over homosexuality. It is now in danger of losing the ‘left’ over cuts to social justice national work.” To that, the NACC adds that, having been offered a misreading of where the UCC stands theologically, the General Council’s approval of “A Song” will almost certainly generate another exodus, this time from both the “right” and “the moderate centre”. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that this exodus is already quietly under way.

The NACC therefore asks each Commissioner to exert whatever personal influence possible to encourage General Council Executive to consider how best to withdraw approval of “A Song of Faith” until a Remit has been carried out.

While addressed to Commissioners, this letter is also being issued as an Open Letter to the United Church at large – individuals, Pastoral Charges, Presbyteries, institutions, as well as the interested public. The hope is that this broader distribution will add support to the action you have been asked to undertake.

Additional information is available from the NACC Office, 1-8000-678-2607 or [nacc@csolve.net](mailto:nacc@csolve.net).

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