

09-07-14

To the Local Session, Board, or Council:

Re. the 40<sup>th</sup> General Council (Kelowna, BC, August 9-15, 2009

Friends –

Greetings, and our apologies for raising these urgent matters with you such a short time before the 2009 General Council's meeting.

What follows is brought to your attention in the hope that you will use it either as an aid to your personal or group reactions, which can be sent to (a) the General Council Planning Committee, c/o The General Secretary (email address, [nsanders@united-church.ca](mailto:nsanders@united-church.ca)), or, better, to (b) those you know will be voting at General Council – i.e. as Commissioners, or as senior Conference Officers and Staff. In any event, since the NACC does not have access to many of those names, we ask that you assist us by forwarding the NACC response below to those same persons.

With many thanks, and in Christ's name,

Geoff Wilkins, NACC Chairman

# THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF COVENANTING CONGREGATIONS

within the United Church of Canada

Corporation # 277932-3-M

09-07-13

## An Important (and Hurried) Introductory Note

*Recently the Steering Committee learned of two gravely troubling Proposals which will be considered by the 40<sup>th</sup> General Council. Consequently, what is immediately below is added to the previously prepared Commentary on "Called to Be Church" which follows it.*

*The two Proposals at issue:*

- ***The Proposal "The Twenty Articles of Faith"***, from Wascana Presbytery, with Saskatchewan Conference concurrence. This asks for a Remit "to remove the Twenty Articles [of Faith] from the Basis of Union";
- ***The Proposal "Equal Access to Services of the Church through Public Worship"***, from Saskatchewan Conference. This specifically targets the right of local Sessions, Boards, and Councils to refuse to perform same-sex marriages.

*The first Proposal is an attempt to ensure new faith statements (like "A Song of Faith") will not be held substantively accountable to the denomination's foundational formulation. There will therefore be no formal grounds on which to test the theological ideology of the day against the historic Christian faith. The second presents new evidence of church leadership's determination to extend its control over the denomination, including forced compliance.*

*The Steering Committee regretfully, but with sad confidence, predicts, that*

- (a) the mere appearance of these two Proposals on the General Council's Agenda will cause increased distress in the church, thereby prompting further erosion of membership and attendance;*
- (b) if approved for Remit, that distress and erosion will be significantly amplified; and*
- (c) if in fact adopted by Remit, the future of the United Church as a viable denomination will be very short.*

*The NACC Steering Committee*

The two Proposals in their entirety are at [www.sk.united-church.ca/](http://www.sk.united-church.ca/); just click "Annual Meeting", click "Annual Meeting 2009", click "2009 Proposals".

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### **"CALLED TO BE CHURCH" – An NACC Commentary**

With little notice until recently, a discussion paper was issued in February to promote reflection in the denomination on where the United Church is/should be headed. Apparently Commissioners to the 40<sup>th</sup> General Council will be engaged in discussion on the matter. For access to the text of "Called to Be Church" (CTBC), see "References", at the close of this Commentary.

1. CTBC opens with the following sentence:

In preparation for the 40th General Council 2009, this document is being circulated to invite the people of The United Church of Canada to prayerfully consider the vision and purpose of our church.

It goes on to invite the church at large to provide reaction and advice, and the General Secretary has said she will forward what she receives to the General Council's Agenda and Planning Committee.

**Comment #1:** The NACC regrets having to underline its skepticism that such advice will be considered seriously, or even be presented to the General Council accurately, unless it happens to accord closely with officially desired outcomes.

*Case in point:* The UCC's record in accepting such advice is not pristine. It was perhaps most obviously sullied when Petitions to the 1988 General Council (re. the ordination of practising homosexuals) were misrepresented to the court as being favorable. On the contrary, a careful and independent analysis of the SOLM response materials (housed in the UCC archives) shows 93.58% against, 5.34% for, and 1.08 ambiguous (*Theological Digest and Outlook*, 7-2, July, 1992). We are not aware that this analysis has been challenged. The court was clearly misled, and despite vigorous debate, it eventually voted to permit the contentious ordinations.

Such (possibly deliberate?) misrepresentation does little for the cause of church unity, but, in the hope that there will be no repetition here, the NACC, is willing to participate in the present exercise, especially given the grave state in which the denomination finds itself. The NACC therefore welcomes the General Council Executive's decision to move the UCC into a broad process of "self-examination" of its work, strategies, and theology. What follows is offered in the trust that our advice will be helpful, if perhaps sometimes uncomfortable.

2. CTBC lays considerable emphasis on the praiseworthy wish to return the denomination to the vision of unity it held in 1925. In its précis of denominational

history, it describes this vision as “one that would honour diversity and not demand uniformity.”

**Comment for #2:** However, when the founding denominations eventually came to agreement over the Doctrine section of *The Basis of Union* (2.0 -2.20) they were clearly not thinking of diversity without limits, but of a diversity that could be honoured only within certain bounds. The NACC believes our founders would be appalled at how far the limits of an acceptable faith have now been stretched in the United Church.

Indeed, the Alliance itself is similarly appalled, and, as Commissioners to the 40<sup>th</sup> General Council may be aware, the NACC, a voice for traditional orthodoxy, recently took issue with 39<sup>th</sup> General Council’s approval of “A Song of Faith”, arguing its internal inconsistencies and incorporation of “new theology” were in conflict with both the doctrinal articles just mentioned and with the faith of many, and perhaps a majority of UCC members today. Given this, we argued it was logical, and indeed *required* under Basis 8.6.2(1)(a), that approval of “A Song” only follow approval by Remit. The General Secretary, and subsequently the Judicial Committee (whose Secretary is the General Secretary), disagreed. No effective explanation was offered the Alliance for this refusal, and there is no meaningful avenue for further appeal.

In our view, this is a good illustration of how on occasion the church uses *pro forma* process to bury uncomfortable challenges. Sadly, its way of dealing with troublesome points of view seldom involves resolution through meaningful dialogue. Adversarial debate in carefully chosen venues and/or careful control of process are preferred. That, however, is not the path to unity of faith, mission, or vision.

### 3. Also on unity of faith: CTBC states,

Throughout the years, The United Church of Canada has been committed to articulating, for each generation, our faith and beliefs. This commitment is evident through “A Statement of Faith in 1940, “A New Creed” in 1968, and “A Song of Faith” in 2006, faith declarations that are held alongside the 20 Articles that formed the doctrinal portion of our Basis of Union in 1925. (p.4)

**Comment (a) for #3:** As mentioned above, the NACC recently argued, unsuccessfully, that to have met the requirements of sec 8.6.2(1)(a) of *The Basis of Union*, the church’s legal constitution, General Council which has approved those new statements of faith should have ensured they did not incorporate *changes* in faith, rather than mere alterations to presentation or language. “A Song” clearly does not meet that test, and, without a Remit demonstrating the wider denomination’s acceptance, it should not have been approved. However, now it has been, we foresee further confusion and doubt over the faith as local worship and teaching introduces invalid theological change. Indeed, we believe that is already occurring.

**Comment (b) for #3:** It is also important to point out that, as part of *The Basis of Union*, the Articles stand above, not “alongside” the later statements. *Basis*,

8.6.2(1)(a), to which we have just referred, would seem to confirm that higher status.

4. CTBC (pp.1-2) refers to how the Executive was prompted to embark on this present exercise by a report which states, “The United Church of Canada is populated by people who have a deep love for the church”, as well as placing “a high value” on “a wide spectrum of theological thought”, on inclusivity, on spiritual nurture, on social betterment, on social justice, . . . . .

**Comment for #4:** The Executive appears to accept this analysis without reservation, but the NACC sees it as just another example of how our church has skewed its priorities. In fact, as Christians, the object of our deepest love should always be Christ, the *Lord* of the Church. It is from love of him, and from that alone, that our love for the church flows. However, we are not altogether surprised at this, since, on the evidence, Christ frequently does not hold first place in the church’s thinking. One illustration of that is how in 2006 the denomination’s highest court was prepared to tolerate the low Christology of “A Song of Faith”. In this, as in other of our official documents, our denomination separates itself from the greater part of the Church Universal.

There are, of course, other ancillary matters on which the UCC has distanced itself from the majority of the Christian world – one being its present reluctance to declare scripture the prime source of doctrine, teaching and rule for life. Indeed, CTBC, p.4, appears to dismiss the Bible as little more than “a sacred book of stories”, as well as no more authoritative than the sacred books of other religions. Surely an interesting – and to us puzzling – posture for a *Christian* denomination.

5. Speaking of ministerial (ordained) leadership on p.7, CTBC points to the looming dearth of ordained clergy. The demographics are deeply worrying, since 70% of ministry personnel in Pastoral Charges are presently aged 50 or over, and only 3% under 35. It further notes, “One half of all ministry personnel presently serving pastoral charges will reach normal age of retirement within the next 10 years.”

**Comment for #5:** The NACC is well aware that a crisis appears to be in the offing, but it is also convinced that at least part of the cause lies with how the church has received and treated a number of candidates for ministry. Thus, there are those (a) who contemplated ordained ministry in the United Church, but who decided to go elsewhere because much of the UCC’s officially declared theology offended them, (b) who have gone elsewhere because of the unwelcoming (and sometimes hostile) atmosphere they have encountered in a number of our theological colleges, or, indeed, (c) who, after being accepted into UCC ministry, have found the pressures to amend their faith and adjust their ministries to the requirements of the “new theology” are simply too great to bear.

On that last score, the NACC’s first three national Chairmen, clergy all, provide a sobering illustration: They all believe they experienced significant

harassment by the denomination, and none are now UCC ministers. One left to pastor in another denomination, one left the UCC and moved into a secular occupation, and the third has been fighting for over a decade to have his arbitrary dismissal from UCC ministry set aside. (Having exhausted all his options in our denomination, his case now nears hearing in the secular courts.) Obviously the UCC is “inclusive” of some, but most certainly not of all.

Highly reputable experts in Canadian demographics (e.g. Ipsos Reid, Reginald Bibby) have reported that at least 50% of those in UCC pews still embrace a traditional understanding of the Christian faith. The implication of that seems clear: Just to retain that stubborn 50+%, the clergy that minister to them must be able to preach, to lead worship, and to offer pastoral care in ways they find nurturing. That requires that the faith offered is much closer to the faith set forth in the *Basis of Union* than that of “A Song of Faith”. If the church, with its training institutions, cannot in honesty adjust to that stark truth - by setting up at least one frankly “orthodox” college, for example - then the NACC sees the demise of the denomination as inevitable.

**6.** There is much else that is worthy of reflection and comment in CTBC, but to conclude,

It is regrettable this exercise seems to have derived its impetus from concerns about numbers and particularly dollars. There is a truism that “Money follows mission”, and the mission of the Church must be to live the truths exemplified by its Head, whose life provides little to suggest that counting noses or dollars should concern us. Indeed, he says the reverse. Rather, we are called to live the explicit truths of Christ’s gospel.

In that context, the poverty of our denominational thought is demonstrated by how, when times were good, we spoke proudly of our being “Canada’s largest Protestant denomination”. Sadly we still do that, but now, rather than counting full members – those who postulate their commitment to the way of Christ through the United Church - we now resort to citing StatsCan estimates of those who report a sort of undefined quasi-connection to us. Not very convincing; not very honest.

It is the National Alliance’s profound conviction that the way out of the present impasse is a return to a high Christology, a Christology unadulterated by Neo-Gnosticism and New Ageism. The use of advertising that caters to society’s predilections and values of the moment are troubling, as is what is apparently acceptable now as *Christian* education, whether for children, youth, or adults. The Church was called to be different from its milieu - as Christ was - no matter how costly that might be for us.

The Steering Committee, the National Alliance  
of Covenanting Congregations

**References:**

- Rev. David Ewart at [www.davidewart.ca](http://www.davidewart.ca) provides a quick and graphic appraisal of the UCC's numerical decline. Mr. Ewart is not connected to the NACC in any way.
- Fellowship Publication's June 2009 "*Connections*", an extended and imaginative commentary entitled, "Called to Be Church: A parable", is highly recommended as it sketches some imaginative avenues open to the church.
- "Called to Be Church" can be obtained at [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca) by searching "Called to be Church".