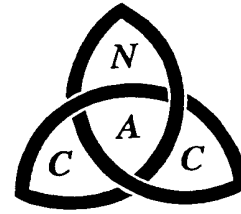


NEWS BRIEFS

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A Time for Steadfast Trust? – It Should Be

Joan and I very recently returned from three weeks in England. It was a trip of nostalgia and exploration, with the nostalgia very much to the fore on our first day, when we walked over from our hotel to my old school. My parents were in the Far East on three-year tours while I was there, and so, from age 11-18, I was a boarder. School was essentially home - thus, lots of memories.

Even by English standards, Reading School is venerable. Founded in 1125 as part of Reading Abbey, it has educated boys from the town and elsewhere for over 800 years. As you might expect, in that time the school had its ups and downs, one of the obvious downs coming in 1539, when Henry VIII confiscated the Abbey, . . .very profitably, I may say.

Responsibility for the school was foisted on the town's dismayed Corporation, which registered its unhappiness by categorically refusing to pay the unfortunate new headmaster. However, on that matter Henry was uncompromising and the Council finally had to bow to the inevitable. Still, the next 100 years brought other major challenges – a nasty century for everyone in the country – with the plague, vicious religious disputes as Catholic and Protestant monarchs alternated (one of the school's headmasters was burned at the stake), and eventually the Civil War.

However, the school survived all that - even prospered for a while - until a combination of poor leadership, mismanagement, and an uncaring social environment led to a gradual but lengthy decline, so that by 1866 there were only three pupils left. You'd think that would have been the end of things, but the public, suddenly realizing what was at stake, roused itself, new leadership was introduced, and funding was placed on a better footing. Despite some missteps, steady growth set in, until by my time, right after WW 2, there were 550 boys. (Now in 2008, the vastly over-subscribed school's enrollment stands at well over 800.)

The secret? Over the years, the school has continually reinvented itself. The medieval abbey school became a Tudor grammar school, and then a Victorian public (i.e. private) school, and then in the Twentieth Century it moved through various special categories of state-supported school. But through each metamorphosis, the school's purpose remained the same – to provide the best possible schooling for the ablest boys of the vicinity.

You may be wondering why I have inflicted all this on you, but that afternoon as we walked back through the rain, it struck me that this history might say something encouraging to those of us

saddened by the United Church's present situation. On the one hand, you have a school that, after about 740 years, was essentially dead. But a year later things looked quite different, and now, after roughly another 140 years, it is flourishing. (Declared this year by Her Majesty's Inspectorate to be "Outstanding".) On the other hand, after roughly just 80 years, our relatively young denomination is in steep decline, down to roughly half its 1966 membership. What lies ahead? The statistics suggest, and several former Moderators reportedly have predicted, it'll all be over within the next 50 years or so.

Is there any cheer to be derived from the story of my old school? I think so, because if that institution can rise from such an obvious deathbed, the UCC can turn things around. Even if the situation were to match that of the school in 1866, the message is clear: An end isn't necessarily an end. And all bets are off if God sees fit to intervene. After all, that's the message of Easter.

What might encourage him to do so in our case? Here's my guess: If he saw that much of the denomination, especially at the congregational level, had decided to take him and his purposes seriously, then he just might decide we're worth saving. What would that take? Jesus' life and teaching made that very clear. He tells us, for instance, to "Love the Lord your God with *all your heart* and with *all your soul* and with *all your mind*. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour *as yourself*. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (My emphases) (Matt 22:37-40) What a transformation that'd be!

I know I'm not even close to being up to the mark in terms of either commandment, and I don't see a whole lot of those around me who seem to be, . . .let alone whole congregations, . . .and, sadly, least of all, our mother denomination. If we *were* closer, we wouldn't be in this situation. **Friends, a sea change is in order.**

Geoff

Tribute to Bob Blackburn, the NACC's Chairman Emeritus

Earlier this year the University of Toronto Libraries recognized its debt to our good friend Bob by dedicating the new Robert H. Blackburn Conference Room in the Robarts Library in his honour. Bob led the U of T's library system from 1954 to his retirement in 1981, taking it from 36th in the Association of Research Libraries' ranking to one of the world's top ten. He also oversaw the building of the stunning Robarts Library which houses the new conference room. Impressive! (And the NACC also owes him a huge debt – hence the "Emeritus", but that's another story.)

Snappers

- If you aren't a regular subscriber to *Fellowship Magazine*, please consider becoming one. The current issue is particularly fine, with much of importance to the whole United Church, which means to you and me. Call 1-800-678-2607 or email felmag@csolve.net
- A little while ago, one of our clergy, now retired, wrote saying, "The other day I conducted a wedding for a young couple. When I signed the marriage license to send it off to the Ontario Government, I discovered the terms 'Groom' and 'Bride' have been replaced by the neutered terms 'applicant' and 'joint applicant'." Slightly tongue in cheek he then goes on to ask whether that means male and female terminology are now verboten in the wedding service itself: "Will I in future have to ask 'Who gives this joint applicant in marriage?' At the end of the service should I say 'The applicant may now kiss the joint applicant'? Will the organist be required to play 'Here comes the joint applicant'?"