

**NINETY-NINTH ANNUAL MEETING  
OF TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL  
Unionville United Church  
Unionville, Ontario  
June 11, 1992**

**'SERVING THE PRESENT AGE' AS  
THE TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL;  
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN MISSION**

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When Lillian Perigoe asked me to speak to the annual meeting of the Toronto United Church Council I must confess that I initially pictured a quite different gathering than what is before me this evening. I agreed to come expecting to have dinner with Lillian and a few of her friends who served together on a committee. I slowly realized from the number of friends who mentioned receiving an invitation that this was a somewhat larger and more auspicious occasion. Lillian hinted that perhaps I would like to get dressed up in costume for the occasion. Then she asked if I would mind being video-taped. Becoming more intimidated all the time, I turned to history seeking encouragement and direction, and began to read *Meeting the Challenge of the Future*, Noelle Boughton's history of the Council. But this proved at first to be no comfort at all: in the first chapter I learned that from the beginning the annual meetings were large social events featuring a musical program ranging from violinists to Ukrainian dancers.

I have taken consolation in the recognition that this is your centennial year, and so you will perhaps more easily forgive me for being a historian and not a Ukrainian dancer. And as a

historian who has spent some time studying Canadian Methodism, I take particular delight in sharing in this celebration with you. It was, as you well know, the Toronto-area Methodist churches which in 1892 formed the Methodist Social Union of Toronto, the founding organization out of which the TUCC eventually grew. People who find out about my interests in Methodism occasionally ask me, "Is there anything left of Methodism in the United Church of Canada?" As I learned more of the TUCC, I realized that I could easily add it to my illustrations of the continuing presence of the Methodist spirit in the United Church. Both in its achievements and in its more recent struggles to understand its mission, the TUCC represents some of the most important ideals associated with Methodism prior to church union as well as with the vision of the 1925 church union which Methodism enthusiastically supported. It has also experienced the tensions which come from trying to preserve an understanding of the Christian life rooted in the past while aspiring to serve the present age, a very "Methodist" problem which I detailed in *Serving the Present Age*, my book about Methodism. The title came not from the social gospellers or progressives who exemplified it in the early twentieth century, but from a hymn of Charles Wesley called "A charge to Keep," which spoke of glorifying God and fulfilling one's call "to serving the present age."

It is never easy, however, to assess what a particular age requires, and Methodists in 1892 were well aware of the pitfalls of relying exclusively on what had worked well in the past. Most instinctively understood what G. K. Chesterton meant when he commented that you can't keep things the same by leaving them alone: a white post left alone turns black; to keep it white you have to keep painting it over and over again. Methodists in 1892 might well have been tempted to leave things alone. They had just the year before celebrated the centennial of Methodism in Canada. They were continuing to grow in numbers and were basking in the enjoyment of their position as Canada's largest

Protestant denomination. A visitor from France, André Siegfried, gives a sketch of the Methodist church as it appeared to him a few years later as he observed the relationship between English and French-speaking Canadians. In a book titled *The Race Question in Canada*, he described Methodists as having power and importance unsurpassed by any of the non-Catholic religious institutions in Canada, in large part because of their organizational cohesion and financial resources. Both those who praised and defamed Methodists described them as "the respectable bourgeoisie, the class of people who having made the most of their opportunities in this world are conscious that they have also made satisfactory provision for their welfare in the next." Despite what Siegfried called "an Anglican smart set" which regarded itself as superior to the comparatively unfashionable Methodists, it was the Methodists who were in his view more solid, more wealthy, had more prosperous commercial establishments and finer churches. They were among the Protestants in Canada who resisted the type of "established" religion associated with the state churches of Europe, but they were at the forefront of support for a different type of "establishment" of religion. This unofficial Protestant establishment exercised its political and cultural authority by voluntary means through a network of such special-purpose organizations as the Lord's Day Alliance, temperance societies, and associations such as the forerunner of the TUCC. Methodists were among the most active supporters of the organizations that comprised this voluntary establishment.

We sometimes think of Methodism as having had a very "other worldly" focus because of its emphasis on personal conversion. Siegfried, the outside observer, perceptively noted that there was much more to Methodism: Methodism was intent on transforming both persons *and* institutions. It had become caught up in a vision of the church that had as its aim the establishment of national and social righteousness. This hope

of more effectively Christianizing the Canadian social order was part of the founding vision of the United Church as well. Supporters of union were proud to be thought of as the conscience of the nation. General Superintendent S. D. Chown explained to Methodists in his 1924 New Year's Message that the Canadian people faced many divisive influences - geographic, economic and political. It was the duty of Christian patriots "to use the bond of religious unity to promote the national oneness of the Dominion that we may attain to a clarified consciousness and conscience concerning the supreme mission of our country in the life of the world." Chown was not always subtle in expressing his political expectations for a united church, and was roundly criticized for his portrayal of the new church as a "religio-political machine." Most supporters of union were more reserved in their language, and yet it is difficult to miss the anticipation of increased moral authority in the political realm - more influence in "christianizing" a social order which at that time seemed threatened less by the challenge of French Canada and more by developments associated in the popular mind with settlement of eastern European immigrants.

The situation of the Methodists who formed a new organization in 1892 is, of course, in some significant ways different from our own. They believed that they were on the winning side of history and the impulse to centralize so as to avoid wasteful duplication was presented as part of a strategy to keep pace with progress. In our "present age" we are not always as convinced as were they of the inevitability of progress. It is difficult to match that tone of triumph which seemed to come so easily in the years leading up to church union. The United Church which Methodists helped to form in 1925 is not quite our United Church, nor is the cultural context in which it finds itself the same.

The TUCC and its organizational predecessors reflect some of

the major efforts of United Church people in this part of the country to deal with the changing dynamics of church and society. I think our French observer André Siegfried might well have viewed such Council activities as the home missions build in the early years in response to the large numbers of newcomers to Canada and the shrewd approach to church extension in the suburbs after World War II as evidence of Methodists and their successors in the United Church continuing to make the most of their opportunities in this world as well as in the next. The TUCC in 1992, like the denomination which spawned its predecessor in 1892, continues to communicate its mission by engaging in activities which it considers appropriate given the temper of the times. As I read the history of the Council I was struck by the repetition of the "re-missioning," particularly in relation to the Council's work in recent years. A glance at a newspaper suggests why an organization focusing on the mission of the church in Toronto might often have reason to rethink its priorities. Canada as a country is experiencing rapid demographic change, of which growing inter-generation and ethnic tensions are two obvious expressions. Nowhere are those tensions now more evident than in the Toronto area.

If the TUCC's past is any indication, we can expect the Council to take on the difficult challenge of anticipating trends that will become clearer only with time. Such anticipation is part of rethinking the mission of any organization - part of coming to terms not only with what an organization is but also determining what the organization would like to become. Perhaps a historian is not the best person to engage in such a conversation - we tend to feel more comfortable handling documents than crystal balls. However, I will venture to make a few observations and to suggest that to serve our present age we have something to learn from what was central to the Methodism out of which this organization grew: the impulse to transform both persons and institutions.

The first observation is that I think that the United Church and groups within it, of which the TUCC is an example, are experiencing the repercussions of both a tribal and a global outlook - what a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article calls "Jihad vs. McWorld." As the author put it, "The planet is falling precipitantly apart and coming reluctantly together at the very same moment." This is graphically illustrated daily in the news, with negotiations for closer economic ties among European nations while the former Yugoslavia suffers violence stemming from ethnic or tribal divisions. Closer to home we watch as politicians discuss the constitutional shape of Canada, determining whether we will fall apart or stay together. I think it can be argued that the United Church is also experiencing some of the tensions between "Jihad" and "McWorld". We have done a better job of recognizing the "global" aspects of the founding vision of the United Church - its ecumenism, its culture-affirming engagement with and transformation of culture; its international dimensions; even some of the less positive aspects of globalism such as the impulse towards bureaucratization. We have perhaps in the past tended to overlook the more tribal dimensions of the United Church, but they are important to consider as well. We tend to think of "tribalism" primarily in terms of protection of the white Anglo-Saxon middle class values held by the majority of its members. But the *Atlantic* article suggests other dimensions of tribalism, a number of which characterize religious institutions: the attention to the personal "religious quest" whether evangelical or liberal/existential; a preoccupation with healing and health whether physical or mental; congregationalism or regionalism - these are a few that come to mind as significant. We experience globalism and tribalism positively, negatively, and simultaneously. And there are webs of connection between them at both the personal and the institutional level.

I mention this particular tension because the history of TUCC is in many ways an expression of assumptions of

denominational structures as they worked in an older more centralizing period. Some observers (e.g. Robert Bellah, *The Good Society*) suggest one of the major challenges facing mainstream churches, which have conceived of their mission in broad terms, is to deal with those who understand their mission in more local decentralized terms. This poses a problem for a group like the TUCC because it makes it necessary to provide a rationale for the existence of an organization that transcends more local structures of accountability, resulting in a clash of two senses of "mission."

My second set of observations relate to an obvious trend: the growing diversity of Canada and the resulting pluralism of Canadian culture. Unlike its Methodist predecessor the United Church no longer sees itself as an establishment, unofficial or otherwise. It has moved from its position of prominence in a more homogeneous society to now being one interest group among many in pluralistic society. To be sure, it is still an important interest group, but it competes more or less equally with other "interest groups"; its cultural authority is no longer assured and certainly not assumed. Some have argued that this situation may produce a more authentic Christian voice, and indeed it may, but the change does take some getting used to. I will quote André Siegfried's *The Race Question in Canada* once again to illustrate that at the beginning of the twentieth century the situation was much different. To all appearances, "the independence of [the] churches in regard to the state has been absolutely established in the New World. But perhaps," he continued, "it would not be safe to say quite so positively that the state's independence of the churches, even the Protestant ones, is established to the same degree." The Protestant clergy did not aim to control the government in an ultramontane Catholic fashion, but, he added, "they do aim at informing it with their spirit." I'm not sure to what extent the Church now informs the state even with its spirit; I think there are times when we would like to know whether anyone takes what we say

as a church seriously, unless it makes controversial news copy. At the same time, I think we, as United Church people, want to know who we are - to know what it is that holds us together as a community, to know whether there is a centre to an inclusive church in a pluralistic society, to know whether we are on the way to becoming an invisible minority. This Council does its work at a time and in a place where such issues are felt in very acute ways.

For all the differences between 1892 and 1992 I will sound for the moment like an old-fashioned Methodist when I say in closing that I think the world needs as much today as in 1892 a group which sees the transformation of persons and institutions as being central to its mission. The TUCC is facing a future that at times appears far less promising than its past. In a *Globe and Mail* article on "The Death of Leisure" Michael Posner argued that dread, not boredom, has become the hallmark of our present age. "It is not simply that personal and corporate expectations are being radically downsized," he said. "The future itself grows ever more fearsome - a perilous minefield of toxic waste, ultraviolet radiation, nuclear menace, fetid air, bacterial water, random crime and pandemic drugs. More and more, the future is a house haunted by the ghosts of our arrogance." Posner quotes Dante: "When the door of the future is shut, all our knowledge shall be a dead thing." He suggests that "the arc of progress implicitly requires a past as well as a future, the place we came from." But he contends that contemporary society, abetted by television, has largely erased that past. History now begins with *I Love Lucy*. As for personal transformation, holiness "is not exactly in vogue." It is dismissed as non-productive leisure. "Introspection is either frightening or boring; fear is unpleasant, boredom we can't abide. We can't tolerate silence. And of course, we long ago stopped reading seriously."

Such an assessment of our future gives us pause for thought.

Whether we agree with the details, it is obvious that we face significant challenges ahead. But then it seems that the TUCC is an organization which, if the past is any indication, thrives on challenge. You have good reason tonight to be proud of the achievements of the first hundred years. Let us hope that in the next hundred years the TUCC will continue to serve the present age by aspiring to meet the challenge of the future and by becoming stewards of that future.