

## **United Church of Canada A Gap Between Pulpit and Pew?**

The United Church of Canada has wide divergences in theology among members and adherents. On the one hand, you can find within her ranks ministers who are extremely liberal in outlook. They regard the Bible as fallible, human records of remarkable religious experiences, some mythical and others historical. On the other hand, there are inflexible fundamentalists. But the winds of change are also felt. The experiences of Rev. J. Berkley Reynolds tell part of the story.

In the late 1960's Rev. J. Berkley Reynolds, when he was studying for his doctorate at Toronto's ecumenical Graduate School of Theology, received a call from the West Ellesmere United Church, Toronto, to become the pastor. The congregation did elect him with a large majority, but the local presbytery refused to support the church's call. The reason given? "It is a liberal congregation and he's a fundamentalist."

Rev. Reynolds felt that the presbytery's action made his case rather hopeless. He commented: "No presbytery across Canada will touch me now. It virtually means that I am being forced to leave the United Church." But Rev. Reynolds did eventually become the pastor of Ellesmere United and has now an effective ministry in Toronto. At the moment his church is planning, despite the opposition of the presbytery, to erect a large new edifice to accommodate her expanding ministry.

Rev. Reynolds is now called "probably the United Church's best known evangelical." He says: "I used to feel more or less an object of scorn in the United Church. Now it seems to me increasing numbers of clergy and lay leaders are sharing my theological perspective. It's a new day."

Liberals are feeling the pinch. One said: "I feel so lonely." The distrust of liberalism began in the early 1970's with disillusionment over Vietnam, economic policies, worry over unemployment. Patricia Clarke says: "Liberal ideas didn't seem to have worked. Cynicism grew about leaders, in government, business, the church."

The official organ of the United Church, *The United Church Observer*, gives a good survey of the trends within that denomination.

### **Christ and scripture**

The divinity of Christ has come under attack by some of the more outspoken United Church leaders. Ben Smillie, a controversial university chaplain, sees Christ's divinity in His life of obedience to God. He considers it laughable that Christ would endorse the conservative belief that Adam, Eve, Cain and Jonah were real live persons. Christ merely believed about the Old Testament that what was taught in the synagogue. He did not know any better. He was not so enlightened as the modern theologians of today.

"If Adam and Eve; Cain and Abel. Noah and Jonah are personages in myth and allegory, they cannot be historical people at the same time, no matter how sincere one's faith. Does somebody question this? Then look at the Bible documents. Any student who has done a basic course on the Bible knows since the days of Karl Graf and Julius Wellhausen (two giants of the Old Testament scholarship at the end of the nineteenth century) that the first six books of the Bible are composite literary works, containing myths, legends, laws and priestly ritual."

## Political views

Ruth Petricek, who works as a secretary at the United Church headquarters, is a refugee from Czechoslovakia. Her father was a minister of the Czech Brethren Church and for a time the moderator. She complains that United Church leaders at headquarters do not seem interested in the fate of the people behind the Iron Curtain. She says: "In the chapel in church headquarters I have heard prayers for the people of Chile and prayers for the people of Vietnam. Never have I heard prayers for the people behind the Iron Curtain. When I read *The Observer*, it is always Chile, Cuba, Vietnam, Southern Africa. Never do I read about the people under Communist rule. Clarke MacDonald is heard on Vietnam, John Foster on Chile, Al Forrest on Cuba. Never do you hear anything on the other side. This is not a thing that is past. Czechoslovakia is still under Communist rule. Human rights are still ignored." <sup>2</sup>

N. Austrins, a native of Latvia, who worked for years at St. Luke's United Church, Toronto, voices the same complaint. He says: "I went to a meeting in an United Church in Toronto where a black man was speaking on behalf of the Zimbabwe freedom fighters. White people were collecting money for those freedom fighters. I have never been in a church that collected money to liberate the people of my country. We are not even mentioned. The church outlines principles for some nations, but not for all nations. It talks about South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Bangladesh, but somehow the names of lands behind the Iron Curtain are omitted." <sup>3</sup>

The same *Observer* that reported the sentiments of Ruth Petricek and N. Austrins also had an article on Chile by the Right Rev. N. Bruce McLeod. In this article Rev. McLeod strongly condemned the take-over of Chile by a right-wing military junta.<sup>4</sup> And later issues continue with the same line of thought.

At Superior Oil's annual meeting of 1978, the Right Rev. George Tuttle tried to persuade the directors to postpone participation in a \$500 million investment deal in a Chilean copper deposit. Dr. Tuttle argued that the oil company's investment "could strengthen Chile's repressive military junta and further penetrate violations of human rights." <sup>5</sup>

So the editorial practices show that the charges made by Ruth Petricek and N. Austrins are certainly not without substance. The critique of human rights is one-sided. It seems easier to demonstrate against South Africa and Chile than against Cambodia and Vietnam.

## **Dr. Billy Graham**

The Billy Graham crusades show the divisions within the United Church. Rev. Bill Phipps of Toronto's Trinity United Church says that Graham's gospel "is what the mass of the non-churched think Christianity is. I say It isn't. I say he 's selling the gospel down the drain.<sup>6</sup>

But some of his colleagues, and many United Church members, simply cannot understand why Billy Graham is not eagerly welcomed. Alderman Tom Clifford of Toronto, a small businessman, a Sunday school, teacher and a faithful elder in the United Church, is enthusiastic about Dr. Graham. "We need to get back to the Bible," Clifford says. "Billy Graham will help us to do that." <sup>7</sup> Rev. W.A. Cross of Winnipeg's Young Street United Church predicted just prior to the last Graham crusade held in Toronto: "In fact, this year's Crusade may get more support from United Church people than it would have a few years ago. It comes at a time when many, in the Church and outside it, are yearning for religious roots. In their search they are returning – or retreating, depending on your point of view – to a conservative, authoritarian faith.<sup>8</sup>

## **Observations**

In his book *The Changing Church in Canada Beliefs and Social Attitude of United Church People*, Rev. Stewart Crysdale writes about a middle-aged doctor, . who is a member of the United Church in an Atlantic city. The doctor belongs to a service club, a recreation group, a hobby group and three professional and academic societies. He reads many books, none of them religious. His favourite magazine, among the nine he reads regularly, is *Time*.

He says: "I cannot believe in original sin, hence forgiveness of same or salvation and an actual life hereafter – and it bothers me that it doesn't bother me further." He appreciates the instruction the church has given him over the years in character and citizenship but also believes that his church has neglected training in doctrine and "theological philosophies."

But the story about the doctor shouldn't lead us to generalities. The membership of the United Church today appears to follow the trend towards a more conservative expression of faith. But I don't think that the "official" leadership has caught up as yet with this move to the right. There is a gap between the pulpit and the pew.

The United Church has devoted much time and energy to social issues. And there are economic disparities between the various regions in Canada. There are still the awful sweatshops in Toronto where immigrant workers are exploited for very low wages. Unemployment is high. Little is done to help the working poor. Our high inflation to is a harsh reality for people with fixed incomes. The social concern of the United Church is commendable. But Rev. J. Berkley Reynolds laments about his denomination: "We've twisted the words of Jesus to read: 'Seek ye first the welfare state and the kingdom of God will be added to you.'<sup>9</sup>

As Reformed Christians we cannot share the United Church's approach to social issues. The leadership is strongly influenced by secular theology. It seems to have politicized the gospel. And as long as the United Church has no fence around the pulpit, i.e. as long as discipline is not possible within that denomination, we cannot expect a positive and sound Biblical approach in the near future.

Our authority must come from God's Word. We must be orthodox in thought and practice. The Reformed faith has a great opportunity in Canada's climate of change. Is it ready to meet this challenge?

One final comment. We are not to watch the developments within the United Church as mere spectators. Let us remember the evangelicals in the United Church and their leaders in our prayers. They need our encouragement.

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