

United Church of Canada

Historical Development

Birth and Government

On June 10, 1925, the Mutual Street Arena in Toronto was filled to capacity as 347 men and women Commissioners and 8,000 supporters, representing the Congregationalist, Methodist and Presbyterian congregations across Canada, met for the founding service of the world's first major church merger.

This union brought together more than 600,000 members to form the United Church of Canada, the nation's largest Protestant church. The UC's organization and church order were shaped by all its three constituents. However, it is mostly Presbyterian. Its supreme court is the biennial General Council (a Congregational term). Next comes the annual Conferences (a Methodist phrase), and then the Presbyteries.

At the local level the official Board resembles the Methodist "quarterly meeting" and the "Session" (a Presbyterian term) oversees the spiritual welfare of the congregation. The stewards supervise the practical affairs and maintenance of the local church. A candidate for the ministry must accept placement anywhere in Canada for the first two years after his ordination, after which he may be eligible for a call.

The Components

As an ecumenical minded body the UC early applied for and received membership in the Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System, also known in English speaking countries since 1954 as the World Presbyterian Alliance.

The UC also became a member of the International Congregational Council and the Ecumenical Methodist Conference. The membership of the UC was mainly Anglo-Saxon. In 1931 the Dominion census told that of the 10,376,786 people in Canada, 5,381,071 were of British origin. The mainline denominations didn't manage to win the other ethnic groups. Even today the traditional Canadian churches remain predominantly Anglo-Saxon.

Many hailed the UC as a significant step towards the Christianization of Canada, the forward march of the Gospel into the old and new frontiers. Others were and are of a different opinion. The Canadian historian Dr. W.L. Morton described the union "as much more a matter of pooling resources and aiding the weaker rural churches than an exercise in Christian brotherhood or the ecumenical spirit. In many ways it was a Protestant rally against the steady growth of the Roman Catholic Church. Because it was these things, it left the new church increased in numbers and in wealth, but uncertain in doctrine and weaker in spirit and influence than before."

Dr. Pidgeon

The UC's first moderator was the Very Rev. George C. Pidgeon (1872-1971). Dr. Pidgeon was ordained in the Presbyterian church. He served as professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Hall, Vancouver. In 1915 he accepted a call to the Bloor Street Presbyterian Church, now UC, in Toronto, where he remained for 33 years in active service.

In the early years of his ministry his chief interest was in temperance and moral reform. He didn't take part in the church union movement until its latter stages. Dr. Pidgeon, a gifted organizer and master of detail, has often been described as the foremost Canadian preacher of his times. He was the last Presbyterian moderator before the union. As ecumenical leader he became an influential advisor at the founding of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948. He was also one of the early architects of the Canadian Council of Churches and the Christian Social Council of Canada.

From the Bloor Street United Church have come three moderators; Dr. Pidgeon himself, the Very Rev. Ernest Marshall Howse, and Dr. Robert B. McClure, whom Dr. Pidgeon recruited as a medical missionary in 1923.

Congregationalists

The Congregational Church, which embraced the union in 1925, numbered only about 12,000. For a variety of reasons the Congregationalists had never been more than a small minority. In 1871 they had only 0.63 percent of the population and in 1891 it had declined to 0.35 percent. Many were absorbed into other churches, such as the Baptists in the Maritimes and Presbyterians in the Canadas.

The first wave of Congregationalists came from the New England colonies. Their first church was established in Halifax between 1750-1760. The second wave came direct from England. In 1839 their theological seminary was founded.

Methodists

Negotiations that led to the formation of the UC were initiated by the Methodists. Methodism has experience in ecumenism. In 1884 the four sectors of Methodism united to form the "Methodist Church." Each denomination had to compromise some of its principles and structures. The episcopate was abandoned, a general superintendency adopted, a large place to the laity given. This new church was strongly evangelistic in the beginning and rapidly expanded. However, the role of traditional revivalism changed after the 1884 union. There was a slight increase in interest at first, but later it had only a sporadic role in the Methodist church. In 1914 the Methodist church was the third in size of the Canadian denomination.

Methodists, like their spiritual father John Wesley (1703-1791) are Arminian in theology. In the early history of the Canadian church, discounting rare exceptions, Methodism was a body of adult members. Children were called upon to make a

conscious, personal decision to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour. Yet, children were considered lacking responsibility for their actions and could only be truly converted as they accepted personal sin in young adulthood.

However, many leading Methodists believed that children - before they reached the age of responsibility – could not be part of man's original sin. As the theology of infant baptism developed, children were dedicated to God, but in no way regenerated by Baptism. However, men such as Egerton Ryerson believed that children still in the state of grace, when baptized, joined the invisible as well as the visible church.

Egerton Ryerson (1803-1882) was an outstanding figure in Canadian Methodism. He was also a leader in education. Ryerson was for a time an itinerant preacher, for years secretary of the missionary society of his church, the first principal of Victoria College and vigorous advocate of separation of church and state.

From 1844 to 1876 Ryerson was superintendent of schools in Upper Canada and gave them the form which shaped them for many decades. He stood for universal, free and compulsory primary and industrial education. The school had to teach morality and religion, but not sectarianism. He was also active in politics. But "religion" never ceased to be his foremost interest.

Methodism was prominent in education. It founded a number of excellent institutions. In 1836 Upper Canada Academy opened its doors. In 1841 it became Victoria College, later to be Victoria University. In 1871 a distinct theological department was established, which expanded two years later into a separate faculty. In 1873 the Wesley University was founded in Winnipeg, a unit of the University of Manitoba. The Methodists also had a college in Newfoundland.

When the one national Methodist Church was founded in 1884, the church had become a comfortable middle class institution. It bolstered the respectability and virtue of the business ethic and emphasized the link between sin and poverty. Concern was shown for stable economic progress. It recognized its dependence on the business sector, ignored social problems, reflected sedate Victorian morality, and alienated the poor.

A spirit of optimism prevailed. In 1897 a prominent Canadian Methodist philanthropist, Hart Massey, wrote: "As rich men see their wealth in the light of eternity, catching glimpses of the divine order, surely they, too, will consecrate the usufruct of their lives for the good of others, then the Kingdom of Heaven will take tangible shape, chaos, unrest and social disorder will disappear, and this round earth will become the Kingdom of our Lord."

Personal conversion experience no longer remained the focus of attention in the Methodist's message. The church in general became more adaptable to the secularization process. Under the influence of theological liberalism a more secular "scientific approach" to religion evolved, which - eventually - culminated in the social Gospel movement.

The general superintendent of this church, Dr. S. C. Chown, officially declared the UC constituted on June 10, 1925.

As early as 1875 the great majority of the Presbyterians, previously in several bodies, partly of the Old World and partly of Canadian origin, united and took the name "The Presbyterian Church in Canada."

The church grew mainly through immigration from Scotland. Continuing its ecumenical spirit, the Presbyterian Assembly approached, in 1982, the Congregational Churches to confer with other churches on the general subject of church union. Union talks with both Congregational and Methodist churches proved fruitful and rapid progress was made. The General Assembly adopted a "Basis of Union" in 1908.

Strife Because of "Union"

But the proposed union ran into opposition. In 1913 an organization was formed for the preservation and continuation of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. By 1915 more than half of the communicants disapproved of union. However, the vote at the General Assembly of 1916 showed that a majority of the presbyters (elders) approved of the union, 406 for, 90 against.

By 1921 the General Assembly reached the decision "to take steps as may be deemed best to consummate church union." The union talks strained Christian relationships, broke friendships and even pitted family members over against one another.

One third of the membership refused to participate in the union. A greater proportion of ministers participated in the union than congregations chose to join the union. The Presbyterian Year Book, as of December 31st, 1924, listed 1,685 ministers. In 1925 the list of "continuing" Presbyterian ministers showed 558. The UC, in 1925, had 270 active ministers without a charge.

In the evening of June 10, 1925, at 11:45, a group of 79 Commissioners to the General Assembly met in the historic Knox Presbyterian Church, Toronto. Their number was not large, but sufficient for a quorum. They considered themselves to be the valid continuation of the Assembly. The church that had been in the forefront of union efforts was the very one that had a serious break within its ranks.

For many years there was a serious rift between the Presbyterians and the UC. In recent years the two churches are on a friendly footing. There are frequent pulpit exchanges. It is also common for the two congregations to join for summer services, taking turns in closing their church. Both denominations are active in many ecumenical bodies.

Procedure Caused Problems

What led to the split in the Presbyterian ranks? The controversy over church union didn't begin over some fine point of theology, but as an argument over the way it was introduced, handled and justified by Principal William Patrick of the Manitoba College. Patrick was the man behind the union movement, formulated its ideology, and, as convener of the Presbyterian union committee from 1906 to 1911, directed its course through the General Assembly. Patrick's tactics polarized the church and precipitated the resistance, which eventually led to the organized conflict - and a continuing Presbyterian church.

Patrick's input was not based on his knowledge of the Canadian church scene. His thinking was not influenced by what he had seen and heard in Canada. He brought his church union ideas with him from Scotland. Patrick was a liberal, associated with Scottish liberalism and the union movement between the United Presbyterian Church and the Free Church of Scotland prior to his coming to Canada. Upon his arrival he discovered that the confessional Presbyterians and Methodists were more advanced than the Scottish churches in their ecumenical union. He was the first of the new liberals who was given a position of authority by the church. He had adopted an evolutionary conception of the development of Christian institutions and doctrines, with both denominationalism and creedalism as non-essential aspects of Christianity.

Patrick didn't take into account the 19th century Canadian leaders' hesitancy to further union efforts after the merger of the Presbyterian in 1875 and of the Methodists in 1884. The church leaders "were aware of the resistance to liberalism in many sections of the church and they believed union across denominational lines should be approached slowly and carefully lest the quest for unity result in disunity. Patrick's undue haste and ignorance of the Canadian Presbyterians' apprehensions greatly contributed to the tensions within his denomination.

Various Motives for Not Joining

The dissidents to the merger with Congregationalists and Methodists Churches declared that the Basis for Union, negotiated between the three churches was inconsistent with the standards of their Covenant of Union of 1875. Underneath the unwillingness to join was also a strong desire by the Scots, who formed a large segment of the membership, to stay with their own kind.

Many also preferred their own form of worship with its solemnity over against the informality in much of Methodism. Some felt that the Methodists didn't maintain such a high standard of morality as the Presbyterians. Therefore, not everyone who stayed with the continuing Presbyterian church had noble motives.

However, by and large the Presbyterians have a larger percentage of evangelical and reformed congregations than the UC.

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