

## **The Rapid Growth and Sudden Decline in the United Church**

For 35 years the United Church grew steadily. Membership rose from 600,000 to over one million. The most dramatic growth came after World War II, particularly through the fifties and the sixties.

In 1959 church growth was such that new buildings were opened at the rate of 4 per week. *The Observer* commented, "The growth will continue, perhaps even stepped up in tempo, for the United Church is growing more rapidly than the population of the country."

Church leaders predicted that by 1980 Canada's population would be somewhere close to 30 million and the UC would add about 2 million to its membership.

In 1957 an editorial in *The Observer* worried about the church losing its evangelical Methodist heritage, "... what about evangelical zeal? We carry on work of human redemption but with limited budgets, underpaid staff, and without enthusiasm. We even phrase our concern for Canada's Indian people, as our moral responsibilities, 'instead of opportunities to serve and win.'"

### **Evangelistic Zeal**

What contributed to the UC's growth in the fifties? At the national level the church was still engaged in evangelistic outreach. Large evangelistic campaigns were conducted by Charles Templeton. In 1957 the largest number of communicants since the union - 40,749 - were added to the church.

By 1968 the church asked why decline had set in. An editorial in *The Observer* declared, "Five years ago we were rejoicing in a great revival. Suddenly we reached the crest and there was a small decline; and those who lose their nerve quickly, or seem not to have read their history books, become sad. It is probable attendance will continue to drop. But we don't need to close up shop and go and hide."

### **A Fast Decline**

By 1973 membership had dropped to 975,000. The church school had lost about 2/3 of its membership; 609,600 in 1965, 247,100 in 1973. The number of candidates for the ministry went into a steep decline, from 718 in 1963 to a low 94 in 1968; by 1976 it had gone up to 502, largely because of an influx of female candidates (roughly 25-30 percent of the total). Instead of being the fastest growing church in Canada in the sixties, the UC turned into the fastest declining church.

Some blamed the decline on the New Curriculum, the ecumenical movement, pronouncements on social issues, and other controversial issues. In 1982 a survey of Canadians on their religious attitudes drew a bleak picture of the UC.

Dr. Reginal Bibby, head of the sociology department at Albert's University of Lethbridge, noted that the UC by 1978 had a church attendance well below the average on a national basis - 28 percent. He also mentioned "that only about 40 percent of the actual United Church members claim unequivocal belief in God and the divinity of Jesus." Though the survey was partially subsidized by the UC, denomination spokesmen said that they contemplated no official response or major action.

## **Two Large Congregations**

The UC has many small rural congregations. Many are two or three points charges served by one minister. Its two largest churches are in Toronto and London.

Timothy Eaton Memorial Church (TEMC) in Toronto has over 3,000 members, double the size of some presbyteries. Its property in the heart of the city's most exclusive medical district was valued in 1981 at \$17 million. Its investments and endowments exceeded \$2 million. The church was founded by the Methodists in 1909. Mrs. Timothy Eaton and her son John Craig, donated both land and buildings in memory of the late founder of the famous department store chain.

At the time of union in 1925. TEMC was granted a charter of its own, allowing it to manage its own affairs in its own way. Its salaried staff includes four ministers (one of them part-time), an administrator, five secretaries and six caretakers.

Its Sunday morning services are broadcast on CHIN. For the morning service 800 of the 1,100 seats are filled. Its evening service has a congregation of 300. The church's 100 rooms are constantly in use by various groups such as the Alcoholics Anonymous and the Toronto Institute of Human Relations. Each year the senior minister exchanges pulpits with the senior rabbi at the Holy Blossom Temple and co-leads an interfaith study group with him.

TEMC has now been edged out of its position as the UC's largest church by the Metropolitan church in London.

According to the April, 1983, *Observer*, it has 3,092 members with an average weekly attendance of 1,950 people.

Rev. Maurice Boyd, senior minister, believes that the congregation's growth is due to the quality of its worship and to the many programs available for all people of all ages. "All this stuff that I've been hearing that preaching isn't important and worship isn't important," says Boyd, "is nonsense."

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