

# DARE TO BE UNITED

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Camrose United Church  
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John 17:6-21a - That they may all be one

It is exciting to experience the whole sweep of these past 80 years in hats [many ladies in the congregation were wearing hats this morning] as well as in photographs and everything else that's going to follow this morning's service. We are celebrating union--the United Church of Canada.

Our Camrose Ministerial recently decided that, every other month, one of the churches would make a little presentation to share a bit of their story with the rest of the clergy. June being our anniversary month, Mary Ann and I chose to present something about the United Church this past week. We talked about the origin of the church here in Camrose, beginning with the Presbyterian and the Methodist congregations, and then the union in 1925. So we're celebrating our 80th anniversary. One member of the Ministerial suggested that said we really should count our anniversary as 100 years because our root congregations do go back that far. It's kind of interesting that we don't do that. In a sense we are 100 years old because the Methodist and Presbyterian congregations in Camrose were founded in 1904 or 1905--at about the same time as Camrose itself was founded. And yet we don't; we call ourselves 80 years old.

There is a way in which the United Church of Canada really did succeed in letting go of those separate identities, and in claiming an identity that was entirely new and entirely ours. So we're not celebrating 100 years; we are celebrating 80 years of the United Church of Canada. That vision of union, of unity within the church, is foundational to the United Church's identity both as a church and as to what we contribute to the world around us. As we have often said, we are not just a "united" church. We are a "uniting" church and seek to be a uniting influence within the church nationally and worldwide, as well as a uniting influence within our community.

That's what I want to talk about today. It takes courage in our world today to be united, to stay together, and not to break apart and separate with each part going its own way in our culture, in our churches, in our businesses, in all of our organizations. It takes courage to stay together through all the diversity and all the struggle that it takes to maintain unity. And so today we celebrate all those people throughout the decades who dared to be united. It is exciting, isn't it, that we have the centenary of our city as well as our province happening this year. Those of you who have lived in Camrose or in the region for most of those years have that sense of what it means, what a precious gift it is, and what an incredible amount of work it takes and has taken, to forge a community that has a truly life-giving quality to it--that has a real soul.

When I moved to Camrose five years ago I felt really blessed coming into a community that obviously has a commitment to the soul of that community. I was delighted to see that Paul Pedersen did the flowers today because Camrose won the Communities in Bloom contest the year I arrived. For those of you who don't know, Paul Pedersen has a flower shop on Main Street, and he does a lot of the work on the floral presentation of Camrose. One day shortly after I arrived, Paul came in, sat down, and told me the story of the event when the Communities in Bloom award was presented. He was at that event, as was Norm Mayer who was mayor at that time, and when Paul told me about it he was like a little kid bubbling with excitement about the most wonderful thing that had ever happened. It was really a delight listening to him talk about the experience of winning the Communities in Bloom for Camrose. Shortly after our conversation it was my turn to write the "Clergy Comment" column in the Camrose Canadian and, being new to Camrose, I used the image of Communities in Bloom and wrote about the soul of the community--that the blossoming is not just what is in the planters out there on the surface, but that the blossoming of a community comes from the heart. This is the soul of community that needs to be tended and cared for.

And that is part of the devotion we celebrate in our founding denominations--that there was a Presbyterian congregation, a Methodist congregation, as well as others founded at about the same time. So it's this commitment to a community within a community, this gathering. I don't know if I can express how important that is to me, because we live in a world today in which some people say the most serious challenge before us is the breakdown of community, the isolation of people, the breakdown of civility. (Road rage doesn't get that bad here, but I used to live in North Vancouver!) We struggle with isolation, loneliness, and estrangement within families. The breakdown of community is one of the most serious issues in our society today. So there is profound courage in any act of forging, nurturing, and cultivating community in order to be united, to be together. And for me that is the essence of unity, of union, and of what the church brings to a community like Camrose. It brings that sense of community of the soul, community of the heart, that keeps a community truly blossoming--that keeps the soul of community strong and beautiful.

The 1925 union of the Presbyterian and Methodist congregations in Camrose is a delightful story. Mary Ann and I were telling it to the Ministerial. Brian Hunter was also there, and he added the delightful bit about how those two congregations sold their buildings before the national union was even finalized, built a basement on this property--just the basement--covered it over, and worshipped there. I still can't believe it. Is that right? Correct me if I'm wrong. And when the national union was finalized, the local united congregation went ahead and got the funding, and built this portion of the structure we now have around us. What an act of faith, what dedication, and what courage, it must have taken for those two congregations, those two denominations, two such different heritages, to see that there was something they could do together and to experience it locally in such a complete and thorough way--to sell both properties and just make a whole new start right here in this community. There was a new vision, a new way of seeing the church and the society around it--seeing the role that the church would play in society. It's hard for us to grasp what a new concept that was. It was a church devoted to community, a Canadian national church that would serve all parts of this great country from coast to coast.

I have a friend in the North Vancouver congregation which I served before I came here. I have talked about him before--Dermott McInnes, the poet. He has a copy of the very first issue of the United Church's magazine, dated June 10, 1925. It wasn't yet called The Observer which is its present name. Do any of you know, do any of you remember, what it was called? It was The New Outlook, and that first issue has a marvellous, simple, drawing of a young person standing on a raised piece of land looking over a beautiful vista. The drawing gives a sense of the energy that existed with the founding of the United Church of Canada. It was a "new outlook," a new way of seeing the role that church could play within a great nation like Canada, the role local congregations could play within every one of their communities. It was a new way of seeing the relationship between church and community, nation, country, province. It was a "new outlook."

When I first looked at that first issue Dermott had, I thought it was kind of disappointing that the name was changed because "New Outlook" is such an active, engaging, sort of thing. "Observer" seems a little bit more stepped back and passive, doesn't it? But the new church was not just a national church. It became a church that had a deep commitment to ecumenicity on a global scale. Most of you will remember the Jubilee campaign of the year 2000 when churches picked up this vision from the Old Testament Jubilee Law that said when peoples have become overburdened by debt, those debts need to be forgiven because that's not a permanent state of affairs. So the campaign to forgive international debt that crushes nations of the world began, but denominations were involved across the whole Christian spectrum. This project has the broadest involvement of any project that has ever occurred in terms of the ability to get almost every denomination of the Christian church worldwide involved and committed. It has been part of the heritage of the United Church of Canada to provide leadership for that kind of ecumenical action in our world.

To be united is not just the global scale of unity, of ecumenical unity. For us as a congregation it is also to see ourselves as part of the greater church, as part of our denomination, as part of our Presbytery and Conference, as part of the ecumenical circle of churches. We always have to fight for that view because we always have a natural tendency to fall into a kind of congregationalist isolation. The Congregationalists were the third denomination in union, weren't they? We don't talk about them a lot in the west because they didn't exist here; it was just two denominations--the Presbyterian and Methodists--who united. In Ontario and Quebec it was mostly independent congregations that came together to form the Congregationalist Union of Ontario and Quebec. So the union movement was already under way; and then that group came into the United Church of Canada.

But we have that Congregationalist streak in our personality as a denomination. Congregations become kind of independent and isolated, and we're struggling with that right here in Camrose at the present time as we look for a vision of our own future. We look for solutions to problems that have persisted for so long and really threaten to undermine the future of our church. And we realize that we haven't been looking at what is happening in other churches throughout the denomination. There is an awful lot to learn because our sister and brother congregations throughout North America have been struggling with the same issues. The United Church of Canada at the National,

Conference, and Presbytery level is also in an ongoing struggle to forge our new vision, so it doesn't work for us to be doing this all by ourselves as a solitary congregation. We need to be joining with others, looking at and listening to what others are doing, so that we can be enriched as well as contribute what we have learned--so we can contribute and learn together as a church.

Because of this isolationist attitude into which we can easily fall, it takes courage to be united. So in that sense we also dare to be united. I'm going through that process myself as an ordained minister. We have a kind of training that gets us into a lone star mentality, and we have to fight with that all the time. Last year when I went to the national symposium called Worship Matters--a four or five day process--I gathered with other church leaders, mostly ministers who are worship leaders. We listened to what is happening, the rich bubbling energy around worship and music, including preaching itself. The whole field of preaching has been changing and evolving. I realized that I have let myself get out of touch with that, and it was so enriching to be with colleagues and to discover that they were struggling with the same issues that I am. There was such a rich input of ideas, and I was able to share some of the things I am doing and that others found exciting to hear about. That was so enriching. It was a challenge for me, a confronting kind of thing, to realize how I have tended toward an isolationism.

We also have an exciting new event coming up in the fall. Our present Moderator, Peter Short, has during his term become very aware of the increasing crisis among ministers within the United Church of Canada--personal crises, struggling with visioning what ministry is about, and so on. He is holding an assembly in November at his home town of Arnprior in Ontario, and plans to get about ten former moderators as well a representation of church leaders--mostly ordained and diaconal clergy, but also lay people including lay pastoral ministers and so on. A hundred people will be selected to come together for about five days to have a grand open discussion of the meaning of ministry, and about visioning the future of ministry in the United Church of Canada.

Well, now, that is the kind of exciting work that happens when we get really committed to being united, when we come together and experience the power of being one together and of visioning together. There's that "new outlook." They stopped calling the national church's magazine The New Outlook maybe because they thought it was no longer "new." But it has to be new; our vision, our outlook, has to be renewed in every age.

I was reading something recently about leadership. It involved a study of leaders in organizations, leaders who have really been transformational in their leadership. It also involved talking to people about what it is concerning that leadership that is really transformational. People say it's not much about what they do. Rather, it's mostly about their vision, about what they see. So today, church leadership is about the difference between (on the one hand) seeing the church as a kind of fortress against a horrible world from which we need to keep ourselves separate and safe; and (on the other hand) seeing the church as faithful followers of a God whose Spirit is acting and transforming our world and calling us to be a part of that acting and transforming. That's the "new outlook," the ever new and ever renewing outlook into which the Spirit call us and gives us the courage to dare to be united.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor