Doctrine in the United Church of Canada

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The United Church of Canada is often viewed as focussing on issues of justice rather than on doctrinal questions, to the extent that some have characterized the church as having no doctrine. The Oxford Dictionary says that doctrine is "what is taught, body of instruction; religious, political, scientific, etc., belief, dogma or tenet." From this perspective the United Church does have doctrine, doctrine that is firmly based in the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, reason, tradition and experience. The role of revelation is also seen in the presence of the Holy Spirit, which we pray will infuse the work we do and offer guidance as we consider together what we believe. Thus, many in the United Church would affirm that commitments to mission and justice are firmly rooted in doctrine that the church has continued to articulate since its founding in 1925.

The original doctrinal statement for the United Church is the Basis of Union adopted in 1925. This statement was put together by representatives from the founding denominations: The Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Methodist Church, the Congregational Churches of Canada and the Local Union Churches. Its Twenty Articles of Faith offer a found-ational document that was agreed upon by these founding denominations, making it possible for them to come together as one. The Preamble to the Twenty Articles affirms them as "the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us," and "in substance agreeable to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures." Before receiving orders in The United Church of Canada, ministry personnel must declare themselves to be in "essential agreement" with these Twenty Articles.[1] And, as with most things in our church, this means something different to just about everyone who must make this declaration. For some, the Basis of Union is a historic document with little relevance for today's world; for others, it is the only doctrinal statement that matters. Any other statement is at best window dressing or at worst, heresy.

Periodically throughout its history, The United Church of Canada has restated its faith in language that would hopefully be understandable to its current membership. The importance of doing so was

acknowledged even as the Basis of Union was being developed. A member of the committee wrote in 1928: "Let it be further noted that this doctrinal statement makes no claim to infallibility or finality.... It will be the duty of those who come after us to find a more fitting intellectual expression for the unchanging and inexhaustible truth of the gospel."[2] In 1940, a Statement of Faith was issued with a preamble that asserted: "Christians of each new generation are called to state it afresh in terms of the thought of their own age and with the emphasis their age needs." In 1968 "A New Creed" was developed with revisions in 1980 and 1994. Most recently, in 2006, "A Song of Faith" was accepted as a restatement of faith of The United Church of Canada for today's world. However, no matter what the current words are that are used, the doctrine of the United Church hinges on scripture, the articulation of Christian tradition through the ages, including in the historical creeds of the church, and belief in the one Triune God. However articulated, affirmation of a Trinitarian faith is foundational, even though the spectrum of theological understanding travels on a wide continuum from the extremely conservative to the extremely liberal.

Because of the conciliar structure of the United Church, doctrinal statements tend to grow from committees, usually at the request of General Council, which meets every three years and consists of representation that is nationwide. Often the church is confronted by an issue, which causes us to revisit and restate aspects of our doctrine (often in greater depth than the doctrine section of the Basis of Union). This may include new understandings informed by context, experience and scholarship. The process of developing such statements generally involves leadership from the Theology and Interchurch Interfaith Relations Committee (formerly the Theology and Faith Committee) of the General Council. Most often, the Committee's theological work will result in a study document sent across the church for discussion and response. Depending on the question, consultation may also engage ecumenical and global partners. Theology and Interchurch Interfaith Relations is then charged with bringing their own wisdom and scholarship together with these responses in a statement for consideration by General Council. Over the past few years, this process has resulted in such statements as *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (1992), and *Reconciling and Making New: Who Is Jesus Christ for the World Today?* (2000).

At the same time, the United Church has consistently engaged in a similar process of study, response and action for discernment of the ways that doctrine should be lived out in the mission and ministry to which we are called. As *A Song of Faith* declares:

> We are called together by Christ
> as a community of broken but hopeful believers,
> loving what he loved,
> living what he taught,
> striving to be faithful servants of God in our time and place. ...
>
> The church has not always lived up to its vision.
> It requires the Spirit to reorient it,
> helping it to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition,
> challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement,
> for we are called to be a blessing to the earth.

Thus, decisions made in 1988 and thereafter about the relationship of sexuality to ordered ministry and equal marriage were preceded by the studies *In God's Image ...Male and Female* (1980) and *Gift, Dilemma and Promise: A Report and Affirmations on Human Sexuality* (1984). These inspired reflection on a number of core doctrines (including beliefs about humanity, creation, sin and the interpretation of scripture) in the light of questions being asked about human sexuality. Likewise, in *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil: Towards a Global Economy for All God's People*, adopted by General Council in 2000, the United Church affirmed that "global

economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and discipleship as Christians". It also confessed that "the current system of unrestrained global market capitalism... constitutes a false god... and is thus a sin against God, against our neighbour and against creation." These convictions about the sovereignty of God and the justice-seeking mission of followers of Christ continue to be reflected in our current work on "Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire".

All of this work has informed the development of our most recent statement of faith, which started out as a request to the Theology and Faith Committee from the 37th General Council, held in 2000, for a "timely and contextual statement of faith". After an initial period of consultation on the questions attending such a statement, a draft statement was sent out for comment from the wider church. After considerable revision, the final draft, *A Song of Faith*, was presented to General Council and accepted in 2006. As the preamble of this statement states: "[T]his is not a statement for all time but for *our* time. In as much as the Spirit keeps faith with us, we can express our understanding of the Holy with confidence. And in as much as the Spirit is vast and wild, we recognize that our understanding of the Holy is always partial and limited. Nonetheless we have faith, and this statement collects the meaning of our song."

A significant further step in the development of doctrine in the United Church will be taken if the church adopts a proposal that came before General Council 40 in 2009. This proposal would add three other doctrinal statements to the existing Doctrine section in the Basis of Union: the Statement of Faith (1940), A New Creed (adopted in 1968; revised in 1980 and again in 1994), and A Song of Faith (2006). These four statements would be recognized as "subordinate standards" — standards for our faith subordinate to the primacy of Scripture. This would be an important development since it would accord the later articulations the weight of inclusion in the Basis of Union along with the foundational Twenty Articles of Faith, and place these subordinate standards in dialogue with one another. This decision can only be made if it is supported by a majority of presbyteries and pastoral charges in the church in a remit (vote), and is then ratified by the 41st General Council in 2012. Congregations are presently engaged in a study of the implications of this proposal, in order to prepare for the remit.[3] The United Church of Canada is a church that exists by an act of Parliament; from its beginnings the church has sought to integrate a wide spectrum of theological beliefs. Today, that spectrum is even wider and where one stands on it will usually dictate where one stands doctrinally. This makes for interesting interactions among the members and adherents. But the core belief system does exist, is being given "timely and contextual" articulation, and is very much a part of who we are as The United Church of Canada.

1.This wording was adopted after Congregational churches in particular led resistance to any requirement of literal subscription to the doctrinal statement. John H. Young, "Sacred Cow or White Elephant? The Doctrine Section of the Basis of Union", *Touchstone* 16, no. 2 (May 1998), 41-44.

2. T.B. Kilpatrick, *Our Common Faith* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1928), 63-64.

3. See *Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured and Living, A resource document prepared for the remit (January to May 2012) concerning the Doctrine section of the Basis of Union of The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada, 2010).

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