

## **Words of Faith Remit - Intro**

This morning I wanted to talk to you about the Remit which Ross introduced to you in December. Last week many of you picked up copies of the documents, and others were planning to download and print it at home, for which Heather, and the Treasurer thank you.

The essence of the Remit is whether or not we endorse adding to the original doctrine that was affirmed when the United Church of Canada was formed in 1925.

Our original doctrine is referred to as the Twenty Articles of Faith. These are the statements that the combining denominations agreed to as the foundation, along with scripture, for the beliefs of the emerging denomination. These statements contain a summary of our faith and our understanding, covering such topics as: our understanding of God, of Revelation, of the Grace of God, of Sanctification, of the nature of Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, covering a total of twenty topics. Since the time of union this doctrine has been the basis for determining the orthodoxy of clergy, though in true United Church style, all that is asked of candidates is if they are in essential agreement. That means that there is room for differences, and so we find ourselves with a clergy and a membership that covers a wide range of belief, though generally within the realms of what is stipulated in the articles of faith. It's how we wound up with the challenging discovery that one of our previous United Church moderators who made newspaper headlines when he was interviewed so that he could not avoid stating that he did not and still does not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus. He does

believe in a resurrection event, he just does not specify the manner in which that resurrection occurred. That sent apparent shockwaves through the Christian church, with some reacting in horror and others with nonchalance. The actual wording of the articles of faith says: "He rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven,"<sup>1</sup> so he is in essential agreement with the Articles of Faith, which is what the church requires.

But the language of the Articles of Faith is not inviting. This is not a document to hand to newcomers to either the Christian faith or our denomination to help them understand our faith or our denomination. The Articles are written in the religious language of the era, and probably were a challenge to lay people even then. The language is even more of a barrier now.

When I was in theological college, my least favourite course was systematic theology, which as its name implies, is designed to be a systematic approach to understanding our beliefs. But the language used often obscured what was meant, and it seemed we spent as much time trying to understand what was meant by the religious terms as we did understanding the concepts they were being used to describe. My university background was in science and so I found it quite disconcerting that the language being bandied about seemed to be as much about impressing others with their wisdom, as it was about conveying ideas for discussion. They used to say it was full of 25¢ words. That's the language of the articles of faith.

In 1940, the United Church accepted A Statement of Faith,

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<sup>1</sup> The Manual, 2010, 2.7 Article VII

which the study document says” amplified the doctrines of the church. We just can’t resist those big words! The 1940 statement intrigued me, because I have no recollection of it ever being discussed before. When Ross identified it, it was news to me that such a document existed. But that’s because, although it was accepted by the church, it was not incorporated into our official doctrine.

The 1940 document is shorter, containing only 12 sections, and both expands and clarifies the Articles of Faith, using more user friendly language – which in 1940 meant 15¢ words! The ‘church language’ or theological terms are still in there, but there are fewer of them, and they are easier to understand, though still by no means simple.

Both documents use old language, and are not inclusive. In many ways, that is more shocking in the 1940 document than in the Articles of Faith, because there are times when ‘man’ or ‘men’ is inserted needlessly. The section about Jesus Christ states: “We believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, Who for us men and our salvation became man and dwelt among us.”<sup>2</sup> It would have been simpler to say who for us and our salvation ... But that’s a generational difference, and also serves as a measure of how our language changes and evolves.

In 1968, the United Church, which has always recognised other traditional creeds without adopting them in any formal way, introduced and accepted “A New Creed.” This was the first time that our faith statements were summarised into a succinct, contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> A Statement of Faith (1940) II. Jesus Christ

expression of faith without recourse to theological language or paragraphs of explanation. It reflects, not only the change in our language through just over 40 years, but also our changing understanding of our faith. It attempts to invite people to affirm what they believe in language they can understand. It has also been allowed to change, and has been amended since 1968. It has not been changed since the hymn book, *Voices United*, was published.

In 2006 the United Church accepted "A Song of Faith" as another statement of faith for its membership. This document does not attempt to be a learned theological statement, but is a lyrical and poetic expression of our faith, covering all of the aspects that are addressed by the Articles of Faith and the 1940 Statement of Faith, but in a manner that is more reflective of this time and place in our church's history. Because it is such a change in format there are those who love it, for whom the language and expression is freeing, and others who find it limited and limiting in its content. Is it more user friendly to newcomers to the faith or the denomination? Does it help in our understanding of our faith and its expression? I'll leave you to decide.

The purpose of the Remit - which is a church wide vote on an issue - is to see if the membership is in agreement with the request to expand our doctrine to include the 1940 Statement of Faith, A New Creed and A Song of Faith along with the 20 Articles of Faith. All of these would be recognised as being a subordinate standard to scripture. In other words, the Bible would still be our primary authority, as it is now. The difference would be, that in the doctrine

section of our Manual, these later statements would be included, and would be understood to have the same standing as the original 20 Articles of Faith – and future clergy will be expected to be in essential agreement with them.

Speaking quite subjectively, for myself, it would appear to me that these later statements reflect the changing understanding of God and our relationship to God. Though they are still moderately conservative in tone – meaning that they are not extravagant diversions from the original Articles – they do acknowledge that how we conceive of God, of Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit has been changing through the years. They also acknowledge that this change will continue.

Everyone who has sustained a long-term relationship of any description, whether as partner or spouse, as parent/child, or friend, knows that the relationship changes and evolves as the parties develop and mature. We also know that how we relate to one another, in these relationships, is often very different from similar relationships in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And so it is with our relationship with and understanding of God. The remit proposes that we recognise some of these changes by incorporating more recent expressions of our faith into our official doctrinal documents.

But within the United Church of Canada, faithful as always to our roots, do remember that these statements are not used in a legalistic way. They are definitive in the sense that if you are not in essential agreement with what is stated here, then perhaps this is not the best spiritual home for you. But the Church, as always, leaves that

decision up to you. There is, has been, and I pray, always will be, room within the United Church for those who disagree about one point or another. This often helps us to develop and clarify our own beliefs and understanding.

Next Sunday you will be asked to decide whether you believe that each of these documents should be incorporated into our doctrine. You will be asked to vote on each document separately, so it is quite possible that you may decide that one or two should be included while the third, whichever that one might be, should not be included.

Please, take the time to read, in particular, the later statements so that you will be prepared next Sunday to decide whether you think they should be included in the future definition of our doctrine, or not. In considering this, there is a suggestion that you should ask yourself the questions which have been included in your bulletin. I asked Heather to copy them so that everyone will have time to reflect upon them before you are asked to vote.

This Remit is being voted on by Presbytery at the February meeting and Ross will be interested in hearing your comments before he votes on your behalf at that level of the church. In addition, we are waiting to receive our copy for voting purposes, and will record this congregation's response concerning each of the statements. A Remit must pass by a positive majority. That means that if 2000 copies are sent out to record the vote, and fewer than 1001 yes votes are received then the Remit fails and our doctrine will not be changed. It is not enough for the Remit to receive a simple majority of yes votes

among those copies that are returned. Even 999 yeses, should that be the total returned, are not enough to carry the vote. Failure to vote is basically recorded as a no. That's how Remits in the United Church work. This Remit must garner the support of more than half of all the Presbyteries, **and** the support of more than half of all the Pastoral Charges in the United Church of Canada in order for doctrinal section of the Basis of Union to be changed. Welcome to the constitution of the United Church!

Oh, and in reference to that former Moderator, I went through all of the statements, the original **and** these later three to see what is affirmed about the resurrection. Nowhere does it state the nature of this event. We simply affirm that we believe that it happened. So our Moderator was, and still is, in essential agreement with the doctrine of the United Church, whether it is expanded to include these later statements or not.