

EVANGELISM IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA: Charles Templeton To Emerging Spirit

by John H. Young

When I teach an M.Div course on the history of the United Church of Canada (UCC), apparently the most surprising thing UCC students learn is that the term “evangelism” once had a solid and respected place in our vocabulary. They are certainly surprised to be told that the three founding denominations of 1925, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, understood themselves to be “evangelical” churches. These students have grown up experiencing evangelism, as John Webster Grant observed in a *Touchstone* article a quarter century ago, as “an extremely suspect activity in the United Church today. No one actually speaks against it, but mention of it in clerical circles creates embarrassment.”¹ What led the UCC away from openness to, indeed an emphasis on, evangelism?

Defining the Term

In his article, Grant asserted that UCC members needed to begin by recovering “the primary meaning of the word ‘evangelism’, which is not making Christians or even saving souls but *publishing glad tidings*.”² Proclaiming by word, or telling (not just living) the “Good news of God’s love in Christ”, was the way a Congregational Mission Task Group used the term in its report to the Thirty-Sixth General Council (1997).³ It is not about gaining “numbers”, but about sharing a story, a story that Christians find life-giving and transformative, in the hopes that others may find it so. The Church

¹John Webster Grant, “The United Church and its Heritage in Evangelism”, *Touchstone* 1, No. 3 (1983) p. 8.

²*Ibid.*, p. 13.

³“Seeking Transformation: Congregational Mission in a Changing Canada” in The United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of the Thirty-Sixth General Council* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1997) p. 544.

has been clear about that point since at least the 1950s, and the current Emerging Spirit campaign has been equally clear. The proposal to launch Emerging Spirit stated: “The premise of this proposal is that, as a church, we are neither interested in selling the gospel nor the church. **We are interested in developing a relationship** with those Canadians between the ages of 30 and 45 who do not currently have a relationship with a faith group.”⁴

1950 to the Present

1950 is an appropriate starting point for examining evangelism in the life of the UCC. It was still in the early phase of a 20-year period which began at the end of World War II that would see astonishing growth in membership, finances, and buildings. In the church structures of that period, the General Council body with chief responsibility for helping members share and live the faith was the Board of Evangelism and Social Service. Created at the time of church union, in the 1950s it was the best-known and perhaps the most powerful of the General Council’s Boards and committees.⁵ What stands out as significant, and as reflective of the spirit of the denomination at the time of union, was the decision to create one Board with responsibilities for *both* evangelism and social service. These two tasks formed an inextricably linked, complementary pair. That reality still existed in the 50s. The report of the Board, published annually in the “Year Book” of the United Church, gave considerable attention to evangelism — in fact it would usually begin with that before moving on to address matters of social service. In addition, the Board put out an Annual Report, published as a separate volume, which always had a number of articles related to evangelism. It represented a largely unquestioned

⁴The United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth General Council* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2006) p. 484 [emphasis theirs]. For a similar recent expression by Keith Howard, Director of the Emerging Spirit Project, see his June 16, 2008 blog entry “Reconciliation”, www.emergingspirit.ca/blog/Keith_howar (accessed June 20, 2008).

⁵While it is hard to make comparisons between then and now, the Board of Evangelism and Social Service in the 1950s would have had a place and status at least as great as any Permanent Committee in the current national church structure.

and necessary part of the church.

The Rev. James R. Mutchmor, who had an amazing tenure on the Board, served initially as an Associate Secretary, and then as the Secretary, from 1936 to 1963. He personified both sides of its title. An unabashed liberal evangelical, he supported revivals and schools of evangelism with the same fervour that he brought to his condemnation of gambling, booze, poverty, and a host of other social issues. Nourished by the liberal evangelical tradition, whose commitments played such an important role in bringing about church union, he assumed that evangelism should have a central place in the church's life.⁶

It was Mutchmor who secured the services of the leading Canadian revivalist of the 1950s, Charles Templeton. A member of the Church of the Nazarene, and a highly successful evangelist with Youth for Christ, Templeton contacted Mutchmor in 1947 to discuss his struggle with fundamentalist theology. Mutchmor's intercessions helped to get him accepted in 1948 at Princeton Theological Seminary.⁷ Templeton led his initial crusade for the UCC in Charlottetown in 1950,⁸ and its success astonished observers. From 1951 to 1955, Templeton divided his time as a revivalist between two employers — the National Council of Churches (in the United States) and the UCC. He drew immense crowds (40,000 during a 12-day crusade in 1951 in Sydney, Nova Scotia, for example),⁹ and he visited centres large and small.

Kevin Kee, in his study of revivalism in English Canada, asserts that, apart from Templeton's immense personal charisma,

⁶It speaks to his reputation beyond our borders that Mutchmor was asked to deliver the initial Tidings Lectures on Evangelism, in the Upper Room Chapel in Nashville in 1955. See James R. Mutchmor, *The Christian Gospel and Its Witness* (Nashville, TN: Tidings, 1955).

⁷Kevin Kee, *Revivalists: Marketing the Gospel in English Canada, 1884-1957* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006) pp. 163-164. Kee's chapter on Templeton is a very fine account of his career and of his work on behalf of the United Church.

⁸James R. Mutchmor, *The Memoirs of James Ralph Mutchmor* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963) pp. 115-116.

⁹*The United Church Observer*, October 15, 1951, p. 1.

his success lay in the way he adapted traditional revivalism to fit the spirit of the time and the ethos of a mainline denomination like the UCC. Kee points out that when Templeton worked for the United Church, he stressed the practicality of Christianity and the need to love one's neighbour (i.e., not to be concerned only for one's own salvation).¹⁰ "Templeton's contemporary terminology, his approach to devotional life, and his openness to modern science, resonated among English-speaking Canadians who believed that modern ways of understanding the world could be incorporated into religious belief."¹¹

The early 50s appear to have been the high point for crusades sponsored by the UCC, for Templeton was by no means the only evangelist it used. Some, like Templeton, were Canadian, but others were American or British. Locally led revivals were also encouraged.

The late 50s saw the UCC launch the Mission to the Nation. It had had such national crusades in the past, and this particular one involved a two-year preparation period at the local level, followed by the beginning of the formal Mission in 1956, which lasted two years. A mark of its success, at least in the eyes of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, was a notable increase in professions of faith in 1958.¹²

The support for evangelism within the UCC, however, began to wane in the 1960s. Kevin Kee has argued that the new members the church gained during the 1950s led denominational officials to emphasize education and social service in the 60s.¹³ Changes in personnel at the Board of Evangelism and Social Service also contributed to the decline in interest. Mutchmor retired in 1963. Though his successor, the Rev. Ray Hord, was not unsympathetic to evangelism, his interests probably lay more on the social services

¹⁰Kee, pp. 168-181.

¹¹Ibid., p. 175.

¹²United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of Nineteenth General Council* [1960] p. 588.

¹³Kee, p. 184.

side. The Board's reports in each Year Book during the years subsequent to Mutchmor's retirement give less and less attention to evangelism. In 1964, local United Church clergy in the Maritimes supported a crusade in the region led by Leighton Ford of the Billy Graham Association, a fact the Board of Evangelism and Social Service noted in its reporting on "Local Evangelistic Undertakings."¹⁴ So, for a time, preaching missions continued to happen, but they now involved primarily local initiative.

And beginning in the late 60s there was a radical reorganization of the church's national structures that would reflect the decreasing importance evangelism held. In 1972 the Board of Evangelism and Social Service disappeared, the work having been assigned to the newly formed Division of Mission in Canada.¹⁵ Initially, as the Division organized itself, responsibility for evangelism rested with two departments within the Division — the Department of Christian Development and the Department of Church in Society. Eventually, responsibility for evangelism would fall solely within the Department of Church in Society.

The reorganization itself did not mean a lessened concern for evangelism on the part of everybody in the Division. The Deputy Secretary in charge of the Department of Church in Society, the Rev. Clarke MacDonald, was, like Mutchmor, a liberal evangelical. And within the Division, the Rev. Norman MacKenzie had responsibility for evangelism, and he was committed to it. But symbols usually reflect reality. Evangelism had gone from being one-half of the name of a major Board to being an "area" within a Department, in the same way that Youth and Young Adults, French-English Relations, Children, Marriage and Family Life, and more than a dozen others, were "areas". The perception that the constituency might see the reorganized structure to be a lessening

¹⁴The United Church of Canada, *Year Book 1965* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1965) p. 110.

¹⁵The United Church of Canada, *Year Book 1973* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1973) pp. 175-179.

of interest may be one reason why the Department of Church in Society publicly stated in 1973: “Evangelism will continue to be one of the major concerns of this Department.”¹⁶ It also continued to assert that evangelism and social action went hand in hand.¹⁷

And it’s worth noting that the Division of Mission in Canada, through its Department of Church in Society, undertook two evangelism initiatives during the 70s. First, after a presentation to the Twenty-Fifth General Council (1972) by Norman MacKenzie, the General Council committed the UCC to active participation in Key ’73.¹⁸ This was a major co-operative evangelism effort of a number of denominations in the United States and Canada, a significant initiative for it having come from several conservative denominations. Second, in 1976 the Department held two “Festivals of Faith”, beginning a pattern that would continue for the next few years where at a three- to four-day event, with good speakers and music, large numbers of persons came together to share their faith. By the end of 1979, 70 such festivals had been held.¹⁹

Several different “restructurings” of the Division of Mission in Canada during the 1980s and early 90s, however, led to the person with responsibility for evangelism also taking responsibility for either New Church Development or Congregational Mission. One can argue that such work would naturally go with evangelism, but the addition of another major area of work, especially New Church Development, meant that, at least within its bureaucratic structures, the UCC had reduced further the place of evangelism.

And there was a growing tendency, stretching back to the 1960s, to identify the words “evangelism” and “evangelical” with “conservative” or “fundamentalist”, which led many in the UCC

¹⁶Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁷The United Church of Canada, *Year Book 1976* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1976) p. 146.

¹⁸The United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth General Council* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1972) p. 64.

¹⁹The United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of the Twenty-Eighth General Council* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1980) p. 164.

to eschew entirely the term “evangelism” or anything associated with it.²⁰ Moreover, the history of the church’s missionary outreach at home and abroad was being rewritten. It was now being emphasized that the United Church, and its antecedent denominations, not only sought to convert Canada’s native population to Christianity but also to implant “Western” culture and mores. And the same thing, so it was asserted, had happened elsewhere, as missionaries from the West carried the Christian message to Asia and Africa in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Evangelism became, for many in the church, associated with a form of Western cultural imperialism.

The rise of religious pluralism in this era also led to discomfort with evangelism for another reason: an association of the term with a view of Christianity as the only religion through which a person could be in right relationship with God. After all, if one was going to engage in evangelization, was one not asserting, at least implicitly, that Christianity was superior to any other religious tradition? The fact that by the 1980s, not to mention the 90s, Canada itself was a “mission field”, where a majority of the population did not participate in an active way in any of the “traditional world religions”, was not yet appreciated by many in the UCC. Nor was the awareness that one could share one’s faith story with another without the assumption that what was life-giving for you had to be superior to the faith stance of the other.

The late 90s saw the beginning of a new appreciation of the necessary place of evangelism in the life of the church, as we can see in the Report of the Congregational Mission Task Group, “Seeking Transformation: Congregational Mission in a Changing Canada”, which was presented to the Thirty-Sixth General Council (1997). In a section entitled, “Confusion over evangelism and mission”, the report named explicitly the change the death of

²⁰Even Charles Templeton, in the midst of his evangelistic work on behalf of the United Church, warned local committees planning his rallies that terms like “evangelistic” and “evangelism” were suspect for many mainline Protestants. See Kee, *Revivalists*, pp. 171, 176.

Christendom represented for Christians in Canada. When one assumed that Canada was a “Christian country”, one only needed to live one’s faith. After stressing that it was important for Christians in a post-Christian Canada (where most Canadians had little or no knowledge of Christianity) to “share the Good News, as well as live it”, the report went on: “In a post-Christian culture, many Canadians will not hear the word of God’s love in Christ unless their neighbours in faith communities recover the ability to *tell* the Good News and to accompany them as they explore the life of faith for the first time.”²¹ Failure for the story to be heard will mean “the church’s witness to justice and its outreach ministries also will become less visible to its neighbours.”²² The “Embracing Transformation” project that resulted from this report received high praise in many quarters and, in my view, has been a factor in some congregations recognizing that a changed time demands a renewed commitment to sharing the Christian story.

The Emerging Spirit campaign has endeavoured to build upon that foundation in two ways. First, it has stressed the fact that a high percentage of Canadians in the 30-to-45 age range have virtually no knowledge of the Christian faith. What little they may know has come generally from television programming. That reality requires breaking down stereotypes about what the United Church is like; therefore the campaign has done significant advertising, some of it controversial in content. Second, it has worked to make congregations welcoming places for those who might decide to “check out” the UCC.

Why Evangelism is Challenging for the United Church

Three factors contribute to the negative feelings toward evangelism. First, the term conjures up stereotypical images of the tele-evangelist — manipulation, anti-intellectualism, and narrow conservative theology. There is, for many, a fear that using the

²¹“Seeking Transformation,” *Record of Proceedings of the Thirty-Sixth General Council*, p. 545.

²²Ibid.

term will lead immediately to the assumption that one is like the stereotype.

Second, the awareness of the arrogant and damaging aspects of some previous efforts at evangelism continues for many to taint the activity. The appropriate desire to recognize other religious traditions as valid pathways to God (something the New Testament itself asserts with respect to Judaism) has led many in the church to be reticent in speaking about their faith for fear they will thereby re-engage in the religious imperialism of an earlier time. Two recognitions may help to overcome that reticence. (1) As the Emerging Spirit campaign has rightly emphasized, most Canadians 45 and under have little or no awareness of Christianity in general or the United Church in particular. To share the good news of God's actions, known to us through the Christ, is not an effort to "pull" someone from their own faith tradition. (2) We seem, as a denomination, to be reaching the point in inter-faith dialogue where we can overcome our guilt for our past sins of religious imperialism and to recognize that persons of other faith traditions are interested in having conversation with us. They are as curious about what motivates us to order our lives in relation to our religious tradition as we are to know the same about them. Persons of other religious traditions do not ask us to evacuate our "truth claims" when we engage in dialogue with them, but rather to recognize that in a post-modern world there is no one, universal truth, but rather, particular truths.

Third, and perhaps most difficult, those of us in the UCC who are over 50 grew up in a Canada where Christendom still prevailed. A significant majority of Canadians were active members of a church in the 1950s. One of the results was that, for the most part, people in that era were not inclined to talk about their faith. Indeed, my parents and the parents of my friends in the rural part of New Brunswick where I grew up were intensely private about both religion and politics.²³ Living the faith was stressed. Those who

²³For an account of a somewhat similar experience, see Marion Best & Friends, *Will Our Church Disappear?* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1994) pp. 27-28.

talked extensively about their religious convictions, however, were judged to be too enthusiastic or, less politely, called “fanatics”. Sharing one’s faith story with neighbours in the hope they would “join you” was seen as “sheep stealing” (since the neighbours were already likely to have a formal religious affiliation), and the practice was judged inappropriate.

In my experience, younger church members are generally more willing than those of us who are older to talk about what they believe and why. Perhaps it is because they have never lived in a Canada where Christianity was dominant. That said, those of us who are “older” need to learn how to do it more readily. It is something that all members of the church will need to become more comfortable in doing. As John Webster Grant observed in his 1983 article: “The church may well find that its vocation in the modern world is to be a saving remnant, but it is not instructed to seek this by hiding its light under a bushel. It came into being to spread a message that had been confided to a few obscure people, and it can scarcely hope to maintain its health if it reneges on this primary task.”²⁴

²⁴Grant, p. 12.