



United Church of Canada

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The United Church of Canada has been instrumental in the increased acceptance of glbtq rights, including same-sex marriage, in Canada. As the country's largest Protestant denomination, the United Church has been an influential defender of the human rights of homosexuals.

In the last few decades, the Church's stance on homosexuality has evolved from condemnation to acceptance. From considering homosexuality sinful, it has moved to celebrating it as a gift of God.

This stance is sharply divergent from the conservative--sometimes blatantly homophobic--positions of most evangelical denominations in the United States and Canada.

History

The United Church of Canada came into being on June 10, 1925, as a merger--after more than 20 years of negotiation--of four previously independent denominations: the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Methodist Church of Canada, the Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec, and the Association of Local Union Churches. (Not all Presbyterian congregations approved the merger, and those became part of a separate Presbyterian denomination; similarly, some Methodist congregations rejected the merger and formed the conservative Free Methodist Church.) In 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren Church of Canada also joined the United Church.

Some 3 million Canadians--about 10% of the population--now identify the United Church as their religious affiliation, though the Church reports only 700,000 confirmed members, and regular attendees of United Church services number only 250,000. Historically, the United Church membership has been as high as 25% of Canadians.

The Church is a significant presence in all parts of Canada except rural Quebec, where it is known as "l'église mitaine" (the mitten church), presumably because of its small size in the heavily Roman Catholic area.

The Church has been influential beyond its numbers. Although it has never been the "state church of Canada," its founding was recognized and legitimated by an Act of Parliament and it has been widely appreciated as a uniquely Canadian institution. Many prominent Canadians, from renowned Prime Minister Lester Pearson to acclaimed literary critic Northrop Frye, have been members of the United Church.

Beliefs

The United Church's founding as a result of a merger of similar but distinct denominations has helped shape its tradition of openness to different viewpoints and its tolerance of a range of theological beliefs.



Metropolitan United Church, Toronto, an Affirming Ministry. Image appears under the GNU Free GNU Free Documentation License.

The Church's structure is Presbyterian. It is organized into Presbyteries (i.e., governing bodies) and Conferences and governed by a General Council, each having membership of both clergy and lay people. Conference presidents and moderators of the national church may be clergy or lay people.

Despite its rather elaborate hierarchy, the denomination vests a great deal of power in individual congregations, which range broadly from moderately conservative to extremely liberal on questions of theology and social policy.

Not surprisingly, congregations of the United Church of Canada also worship in a variety of styles, reflecting the complex history of the denomination. Some congregations are distinctly evangelical in style of worship, featuring Pentecostal fervor and gospel music, while others employ a liturgy similar to that of high-church Anglicanism.

The Church's official theological positions tend to be similar to those of other evangelical Christian denominations, but are either expressed vaguely so as to avoid disputes over fine points of dogma or diverge from other denominations by virtue of their liberalism.

For example, while the Church affirms the Bible as the "Word of God" and as "a source of wisdom, personal prayer, and devotion . . . [that] can bring us closer to God," it pointedly disavows "inerrancy" or the belief that the Bible should be taken literally. It sees the Bible as a cultural artifact--the stories of two ancient communities--that needs to be interpreted in the light of tradition, inspiration, and contemporary knowledge.

Similarly, although Baptism is, along with Communion, one of the denomination's two sacraments, the Church does not believe that Baptism is a requirement for God's love or that people who die without Baptism are condemned.

Moreover, the Church prides itself on its inclusiveness and its dedication to social justice. According to its official website, it welcomes "everyone the way Jesus did, regardless of age, race, class, gender, orientation, or physical ability."

Social Issues

The United Church of Canada has a rich history of social activism. From the time of its founding, adherents of the "social gospel"--i.e., those who believe in applying Christian principles to social problems--have been prominent in the Church. Hence, the Church has long been involved in such issues as the alleviation of poverty, the achievement of racial justice, the expansion of women's and minority rights, and the protection of the environment. It has attempted both to influence national social policy and to achieve social justice within the Church itself.

One of the first major issues that the United Church faced soon after its founding was the role of women in the Church. The debates over ordaining women as clergy were fierce, and threatened to lead to schism within the new denomination, but ultimately the liberals within the Church prevailed. In 1936, Lydia Gruchy was ordained as the first female minister in the United Church of Canada. The leadership of women in the Church is no longer a contentious issue.

In terms of national issues, the Church has led in supporting women's rights, workers' rights, universal medical care, and other progressive causes. Since the 1960s, it has been supportive of the Palestinian cause in the Middle East, while at the same time consistently denouncing anti-Semitism, especially in Canadian society.

As early as 1977, the United Church went on record urging Canada's Parliament to amend human rights laws to protect gay men and lesbians against discrimination. Since the late 1990s, it has been especially active in promoting tolerance toward homosexuals and equality under the law for homosexuals, including those in same-sex relationships.

Homosexuality in the Church

Although the United Church addressed issues of human sexuality, marriage, and divorce early in its existence, it was not until 1978 that it established a task force to study human sexuality. In 1980, the task force issued a report entitled *In God's Image . . . Male and Female: A Study on Human Sexuality*.

Although this report reached few definitive conclusions, asking that its members consider their own sexual experience and to reflect on it in light of the gospel and modern knowledge, it set the stage for further study. In particular, it called for study of the possibility of sex education in the Church, of the role of the Church in supporting its members' sexual journeys, and the question of the Church's position on homosexuality, including the civil rights of homosexuals and the ordination of open homosexuals to the ministry.

More pointedly, the report commented, "there is no reason in principle why mature, self-accepting homosexuals, any more than mature, self-accepting heterosexuals, should not be ordained or commissioned."

However, when an openly lesbian candidate applied for ordination to the Hamilton, Ontario Conference later that year, she was rejected. The Hamilton Conference subsequently asked that the Church specifically bar gay men and lesbians from the ministry.

In 1982, a group of homosexuals within the United Church formed Affirm United, an organization devoted to supporting gay men and lesbians in the Church and advocating for their rights.

Later in the year, the Church established a task force to consider the question of whether homosexuals were eligible for ordination to the ministry. In preparing their report, the task force consulted not only Affirm United, but also representatives of the United Church Renewal Fellowship (UCRF), a group founded in 1966 to espouse conservative positions within the Church.

In 1984, the task force's eagerly awaited report, *Sexual Orientation and the Eligibility for the Order of Ministry*, recommended "That in and of itself, sexual orientation should not be a factor determining membership in the Order of Ministry of the United Church of Canada."

The recommendation, though rather tentatively made and with plenty of "wobble room," was nevertheless bitterly contested by the UCRF and other members of the Church. The UCRF issued its own report that argued that the solution to the problem of homosexuals in the Church was to convert them to heterosexuality via reparative therapy. Local discussion groups that were formed in the report's aftermath also overwhelmingly rejected the task force's recommendation.

Nevertheless, when the task force issued its final report, *Gift, Dilemma, and Promise: A Report and Affirmations of Human Sexuality*, in 1988, its recommendations were more emphatic and impassioned than its original report. The new report amounted to a forceful rejection of the arguments of the UCRF and the local discussion groups.

The final report affirmed that all human beings, regardless of sexual orientation, are persons made in the image of God. Not only did it recommend that the Church welcome sexually active gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals into all aspects of the Church, including the ministry, but also that the Church develop liturgies to recognize gay and lesbian relationships.

The recommendations of the task force created a firestorm of controversy in the Church. A conservative Committee of Concern issued a "Declaration of Dissent" and vowed to defeat the recommendations at the General Council later that year. A poll taken by the Church revealed that only 28% of the membership supported the ordination of homosexuals to the ministry.

At the General Council, the expectation was that the recommendations of the task force would be decisively rejected. However, that did not happen.

Perhaps the visceral homophobia of Christian fundamentalists from the United States who had crashed the meeting and proceeded to spew hatred toward sexual minorities turned the tide in favor of the recommendations. Or it may be that the testimony of openly gay members of the Church swayed the meeting.

In any case, after heated debate, the Council voted by a 3 to 1 majority "That all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation, who profess Jesus Christ and obedience to Him, are welcome to be or become full members of the Church" and that "All members of the Church are eligible to be considered for the Ordered Ministry."

Another resolution urged the Church to oppose discrimination against homosexuals both within the Church and without.

These historic recommendations set the United Church on the road toward welcoming gay men and lesbians fully into the Church and advocating on their behalf to the wider society.

The culmination of the Church's embrace of homosexuals came in 2000, when the General Council affirmed that human sexual orientations--homosexual no less than heterosexual--are "a gift of God and part of the marvelous diversity of creation."

Same-Sex Marriage

In 1992, the General Council of the United Church of Canada directed that liturgical and pastoral resources for same-sex covenants be made available to congregations. Although the Council did not mandate the performance of same-sex covenants or blessings for same-sex partners, it encouraged congregations to offer them.

In 1999, representatives of the Church appeared before Parliament's Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights to testify in favor of a bill extending pension rights to surviving partners in same-sex relationships on the same basis as those in heterosexual relationships.

In 2000, the General Council resolved to work toward the civil recognition of same-sex partnerships. In response, many congregations began to record the commitment ceremonies of same-sex couples in their marriage registers and to forward these registrations to provincial governments for licensing.

In 2003, the United Church published a congregational guide entitled *Of Love and Justice: Toward the Civil Recognition of Same-Sex Marriage*. Later that year, after courts in Ontario and British Columbia had ruled in favor of the rights of gay couples to marriage, the General Council called upon the Government of Canada to recognize same-sex marriage throughout the country.

In the subsequent struggle for a national bill recognizing same-sex marriage in Canada, the United Church played a pivotal role. Not only did representatives of the Church testify on behalf of marriage equality, but

they also actively lobbied in favor of Bill C-38, the authorizing legislation. This lobbying effort was crucial, for it exploded the myth that all Christians--and all Christian denominations--were opposed to same-sex marriage.

On behalf of the General Council, Jackie Harper and Choice Okoro wrote Prime Minister Martin that "The United Church unequivocally supports the rights of same-sex couples to have access to civil marriage; it also unequivocally supports the rights of communities of faith to decline to perform such marriages."

The Church's Moderator, Rev. Dr. Peter Short, not only editorialized in national newspapers in favor of same-sex marriage, but also wrote members of Parliament that the Church's decision to support same-sex marriage "has been reached not by abandoning Christian faith, tradition, and values, but by implementing them. I write to you in the hope that you will resist the assumption that anyone who speaks from Christian faith, tradition, and values must be against equal marriage."

Dr. Short went on to say that "For me, Christian faith, tradition, and values contribute to our hope for that day when earth once more is fair and her children one, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people--all her children." He concluded by reiterating that "The General Council of The United Church of Canada believes that equal marriage is a step on the path to justice, peace, and the common good."

The United Church's eloquent testimony in favor of equal marriage rights contrasted vividly with the sometimes disrespectful comments and specious reasoning of representatives of other evangelical denominations and of the Roman Catholic Church in opposition to same-sex marriage. The positive response of the Church also contrasted with the official silence on this issue by the Anglican Church of Canada.

Given the congregational governance of the United Church, the General Council cannot mandate that all congregations perform same-sex marriages, but it urges that they do so and makes available to them a number of resources to facilitate discussion and dialogue on the topic of same-sex marriage.

Affirm United

The Advocacy organization, Affirm United, formed in 1982 to support gay men and lesbians in the United Church, provides educational opportunities and resources to encourage acceptance of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities by members, congregations, and decision-making bodies of the United Church of Canada.

In 1992 Affirm United launched the Affirming Ministries Program to assemble a network of United Church congregations and ministries that declare themselves to be fully inclusive of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

Before being certified as Affirming, local congregations, colleges, church courts, and other ministries must study issues of sexual orientation and identity, make a statement of welcome, and commit themselves to work for justice and inclusion within their congregation, the wider church, and their community.

The United Church officially endorsed the program in 2000 and encouraged its ministries to participate. As of 2007, there were 43 Affirming Ministries in the program. Affirm United's website offers a list of Affirming Ministries and directs visitors to congregations that perform same-sex weddings.

The organization holds an annual conference and publishes an on-line journal, *Consensus*.

Conclusion

The United Church of Canada has been a leader in protecting the civil rights of Canadian homosexuals and in welcoming glbtq members to participate fully in the Church. However, some members of the Church have found its advocacy on behalf of homosexuals, and its movement from condemnation of homosexuality to a celebration of it, deeply distressing. These adherents of a more traditional approach to human sexuality and marriage feel abandoned by the Church.

But if anything the conservative groups within the Church have lost membership and influence since 2000. The UCRF has been reduced to holding an annual conference in Newfoundland, and another group, the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations, which supports traditional views of sexual morality and marriage, counts only 75 congregations as members. Clearly, the conservatives' dire predictions of a schism in the Church over its pro-gay activism have not been realized.

Although affected by a general decline in church attendance and membership in Canada, the United Church seems committed to continue its history of social action in pursuit of justice and to extend its welcome to its glbtq members.

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