

What are our Hopes for the UCC for the next 100 years?

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Reading: Mark 4:1-41 ESV

I have been in contact with Wall Street Church over the years. I was in the pulpit here twice before, once on a pulpit exchange in 1980, and then in 1988, as the President of the Montreal Ottawa Conference. (That year was a big year for the United Church!).

My brother-in-law Jim and his wife Linda Hanes are active members of Wall Street; their son, Brother Joachim Marie (Christopher Hanes), was a youth at Wall Street. He also worked with me for two years at Dandelion Society, with the homeless on the streets of Victoria, before being called by God to the Roman Catholic Carthusian, Clustered, Silent Order in Vermont, where he has been for the last four years, serving as a Brother there. Rev Ian Smith and his lifetime partner, Sylvia, are adherents to this congregation, and the three of us studied theology at McGill University.

Since the United Church of Canada was formed, 44 moderators have represented the church nationally and internationally. These spiritual leaders have shepherded the church through enormous change, presided over moments of accountability and offered comfort and challenge to those in the pews.

This church has found your minister, your shepherd, and your administrator, Reverend Doctor Kimberly Heath, who was called by God to put her name forward as moderator. That takes a lot of courage and faith! At the recent General Council, God saw it fit to call Kimberly forward to serve as our next moderator of the UCC. This calling at this time in our history will not be easy. I suggest that we all offer up a prayer for the Right Reverend Kimberly Heath and her calling as our moderator, over the next few years.

Many of the homeless over the years have asked me what the UCC represents.

That is a difficult question to answer, as we have our differences in our theology from east to west, from north to south. We are a vast variety of people. We like our ancestry, and have found our Unity in Hope. We are hopeful people!

We look at the world today with 57 countries at war, many with no end in sight. Starvation and hunger remain significant global issues, with millions facing food insecurity and famine. At the same time, the world produces enough food to feed everyone, but systemic issues like conflict, climate change, and economic inequality lead to rising starvation.

Our church remains a hopeful people. We hope for a world of no war, no starvation, no malnutrition. Not just the UCC but many other faith groups hope and pray for a world of peace.

As Canadians, many around the world ask: who are we and what do we stand for? Pierre Berton was asked at a world conference, "Is it true that Canadians are a nation of prudes?" To set the record straight, he answered, "*A Canadian is someone who knows how to make love in a canoe!*"

Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau often posed in a canoe, wearing a buckskin jacket. This image of the rugged Canadian rocking the love boat coincided with a new image of Canada on the world stage.

Is there hope for our church, our country and the world? I have often heard it said that it's '*up to the next generation*'. That, at best, is a cop-out and not the truth. The seeds of hope that we sow together today will have an outcome similar to that of the seeds in the parable of Jesus. Some of our efforts will fail, some are destined to live. We cannot know the outcome, but we know that whatever lives and bears fruit will not look like the seed we are sowing today.

I ask you all, what seeds of hope will bring life to the church? What will our church look like in the next hundred years? In our first 100 years, we were the first to ordain a woman. We were the first to declare that one's sexual orientation does not affect one's ordination into the church.

At the recent General Council, we were the first to apologize and recognize the LGBTQIA community, welcoming them into the UCC and asking for forgiveness. In 1988, at the 32nd General Council, the Council acknowledged the apology to the Indigenous people, expressing its hope that the church would live out our apology within the life of the church.

Our past has not always been faithful. Reconciliation meetings are going on today across Canada for the UCC's part in the residential schools and the atrocities we committed there.

I am honoured that the Ahousat Nation has asked me to be a witness at their reconciliation gatherings. At one such meeting, a white man asked when all the stories about the residential schools would end, and we could move on. An elder First Nations woman who was a resident at Port Alberni residential school stood up from her wheelchair and said "My ancestors and my family have listened to the Christian story for generations. We expect you to listen to our stories as long as we have heard your story." Being a Christian is not easy.

C.S. Lewis writes: "I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

Mark 4 : 1-6 makes it very clear that the seeds we sow today will be the harvest our church will reap in our future. That you and I are commissioned to sow seeds of hope for the future of the church. What are your hopes for the future of our church? What are your dreams?

I hope we are still the shining light of social justice in the future. I hope that we are a church that continues to break down barriers between our brothers and sisters. And I hope that the future of our church will fully embrace other faith groups by breaking down the barriers that separate us and truly embracing their journey, without judgment.

One day, I hope the UCC can say *we are not the only way*. We do not have all the answers. We do not hold all the truth and light. And we can learn from each other.

The ecumenical movement calls us not so much to find a common denominator as it does to join hands and to pledge ourselves to walk side by side, to enrich one another by sharing our past and having an understanding of how we have separated and created distance between us—asking the other for forgiveness for our blindness, that for so long has kept us divided.

The ecumenical journey will lead modern Christians to a fearful, anxious future, where we all will be compelled to set aside narrow claims and to embrace the openness of this new day.

When the Christians of the world can do this, then perhaps in that larger community of faith, worshipers and believers will include the Jews, the Muslims, the Buddhists, Hindus and others.

They will come, I trust, with equal claims to being children of the one God equally created in that God's image, equally loved and sought in that God's plan for salvation. That is a courageous, fearful, universal hope and challenge that the gospel puts before us this day.

I would hope that in our future, we will recognize that unity with others is not uniformity, but a choice to love and journey with the other despite differences in theology, culture and practice. It is stepping out of our comfort zone and looking at the world with new eyes.

It's about appreciating the world with renewed wonder and curiosity, much like experiencing it for the first time ... or shall I use a loaded theological term: it's like being "born again!"

We believe that God loves the whole world, and we try to love others as He taught us. He hath shown us all, what is good: and what doth the Lord require of us all but to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God? (Micah 6:8)

We seek justice that is rooted in love, mercy and dignity for all God's Creation.

Certainly, the future within our church will not be easy, but we are not alone. We stand together as a church of justice. I know many are tired. It has been a long, arduous journey. From the Old Testament, we read:

"But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

Isaiah 40:31

From the New Testament, we read *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."* Romans 15:13

In my calling from God, I have worked outside the walls of the church, on the streets, a ministry of social justice. I thank you, UCC, and all of you for embracing and supporting the social justice ministry like mine across this country. I would encourage you to read my book, *Muddy Water*. I will be in the Hall following the service, and the book will be available

I was going to end with asking how many have canoes stored away, but I think I will leave that for another day!

Thank you for this opportunity. And may God bless you all. Amen.

Resource books:

'Conviction' by Markus J Borge, *'The God We Never Knew; & 'A New Christianity for a New World',* by John Shelby Spong