

October 25, 2009 21st Sunday after Pentecost

WHAT DOES THE UNITED CHURCH REQUIRE OF YOU?

These words are found on the United Church website: "Based on the understanding that the Bible is the ultimate standard for our faith, membership in the church is based on a profession of faith, not on adhering to a particular creed. New members are asked to profess their faith in the triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - and to commit themselves to faithful conduct in the church and in the world." This is all that is required to become a member of the United Church of Canada.

At Bible study this week, I asked the participants what they had to do to become members of the United Church: the answers ranged from nothing at all to a series of confirmation classes. I know churches that require a certain number of hours of service in the community, others that require active participation for a year, some that include a year-long course in discipleship. Most congregations certainly ask people to attend a series of classes so they can make an informed commitment to the church. The requirements of membership, above and beyond a public profession of faith, are up to each individual congregation to decide.

In the United Church of Canada, you become a member at baptism, but there is a distinction made between being baptized into the church as an infant, and making a commitment to full membership as a teenager or young adult (though sometimes this happens at a younger age). Full membership is assumed to come with a conscious choice and a public profession of faith.

There are many denominations that base their membership on a parish model: if you live in a certain geographical area, and were baptized into that denomination, you are considered a member of the congregation in that area, regardless of whether or not you've ever had anything to do with that congregation. Other churches require a public commitment to their particular community, including a statement that you will adhere to their particular set of beliefs and practices. The United Church takes neither of those approaches.

In the United Church of Canada, in order to be a full member of a congregation, you need to be either baptized as a child and confirmed as an adult in that United Church, or baptized as an adult, or transfer from another denomination or another United Church congregation – all of these require an act in public worship. If you are a United Church person but have never transferred your membership to this congregation, you are considered an *adherent* not a member. If you are a Christian of another denomination but are active in this congregation, you are not a member unless you choose to transfer. If you have sat on committees of the church for 30 years but never made a public affirmation of faith or transferred your membership here, you are not a member. *I can just feel the hackles rising out there!* This is a sensitive issue for many in the church, since nowadays in many churches there are at least as many adherents and members, and no-one wants to feel like their presence or contribution is less valued than another's.

Perhaps I need to note that membership carries few privileges in the United Church these days: about the only places where being a member makes a difference is in voting on what are referred to as “spiritual matters”, such as worship, issues related to the ministry staff, and that sort of thing. But it seems highly ironic to me that, particularly in the latter instance, folks who haven't attended in 3 years but still have their names on the membership roll can vote, and those who have been active for years but never became members, can't!

This is why the United Church of Canada has been struggling with the whole membership issue for decades. The issue has been compounded by the fact that studies show younger people in general don't have a lot of interest in becoming members in much of anything. In previous generations, in order to participate fully in an organization one had to become a member. In other words, *membership equals belonging*. For my generation and those younger than I, membership doesn't matter as much. It's *participation* that counts. If I *participate, then I belong*. It may even be true to say that commitment comes after participation and belonging, rather than as the beginning of that process.

So is there any meaning to church membership in this day and age? Some would say “no”; that the days of asking people to become members is over and done with. I can certainly see their point of view, but it leaves me troubled: not because I feel that becoming a member necessarily means you'd become any more committed than otherwise, but because I don't know how else we're going to challenge people to make a real commitment, not just a superficial one, to walking the Christian path together with us.

If we can't define commitment through church membership, how can we define it? What commitment can we legitimately ask of people who want to be considered a part of Christian community, who want to shape its values and be a part of its mission? Perhaps the question ought to be, not, what is required for membership in the United Church of Canada, but what are the marks of a disciple of Jesus Christ? As long as we are an institutional church, we will still have to deal with questions of who can vote on which issues and who can serve in what capacities; but that cannot be our main focus. Our main focus needs to be how we are forming disciples of Jesus Christ, and helping people live lives that are consistent with being a follower of Jesus..

The Council in Jerusalem needed to sort out these kinds of questions for their time and place. The old rules, it appeared, no longer applied. They could no longer ask people to become full converts to Judaism, up to and including being circumcised, in order to be full members of Christian communities. So what could they ask? Well, they decided that those who became a part of their Christian communities would be asked to observe Jewish standards of sexual morality, refrain from activities associated with the worship of idols, and observe aspects of kosher law. If we were to come up with a list of behaviours expected of those who want to exercise their discipleship by participating in our Christian community, what would they be? And are there things that we have assumed are necessary to full participation that can and even should be discarded as barriers to the inclusion we want to practice as Christian people?

Let's take public worship as an example. Since the earliest days of the Christian church it has been assumed that, for the majority of Christians, with the possible exceptions of hermits, participation in regular Sunday worship is absolutely essential to walking in the way of Jesus. Yet there are many, many people these days who would consider themselves faithful Christians who either aren't able to attend Sunday worship or who don't consider it central to their Christian walk. What do we do with that? Certainly we can adapt and try to offer different types of worship or services held at times other than Sunday morning to include those who aren't able to attend Sunday worship; but what about those who just don't consider it important? Do they still belong to the community of faith? Are they disciples of Jesus Christ? Do you or I want to make that judgement?

According to the *Manual* of the United Church of Canada, anyone who has absented themselves from public worship for a period of three years or more, without reasonable excuse, should be removed from the membership rolls. What do you think of that? Does this make sense in today's mobile society? Does it make sense in a society where if people don't work Sundays they might not work at all? Is attendance at public worship still the chief measure of a person's commitment to Christian community, or are other measures more important?

The Christian faith has always been a religion practised in community. Mutual support and accountability are important for us in walking the path of Jesus. Jesus was not a hermit, he was not an ascetic, he was not a man who separated himself from others and from life. He was a person who welcomed all, ate and drank with the sinner and the self-righteous, worshipped with his community in a time-honoured fashion, and also went off to pray alone from time to time – though the need of the people always drew him back. Christianity is about relationship, not separation, and it's also about inclusion. How radical can we be in that inclusion? Someone suggested the other day that the person who walked in the door for the first time on the day of a crucial congregational meeting should have as much say about the outcome of that meeting as the person who has been a part of the life of the church for generations. Can we be that radical? Do you think we should be?

These questions are difficult, I know. The need to be open, welcoming, and radically hospitable, often comes into tension with our sense of tradition, our need for good order, and with a perfectly reasonable expectation of commitment as part of Christian discipleship. The Council in Jerusalem made their decisions, guided by the Holy Spirit. For us, as the inheritors of 2000 years of Christianity dominated by Gentiles, those decisions probably don't look very radical at all. But for them, it was a sharp bend in tradition, that set them off on a path that the first disciples of Jesus probably never would have predicted. I expect the Holy Spirit will continue to prod us, challenge us, make us think more deeply and explore more radical choices. In the meantime, the good news is, that you are here, and I am here, and in God's eyes, we are equal: equally loved, equally valued, equally challenged to grow in love and service as disciples of Christ. God's grace is ours, the Holy Spirit will guide us, and we do not walk this path of faith alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.