

East Plains, Sept. 21, 2025

**THAT ALL MAY BE ONE:
WHY THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA?**

I Cor. 1:10-17; John 17:21.

This morning I'm raising the question: Why was the United Church of Canada put together 100 years ago, and how did it come about?

Why are we sitting here in East Plains United Church, rather than East Plains Methodist Church? – (since this was a Methodist church, here on this spot for 82 years, from 1843 to 1925.)

Church union in 1925 was one attempt to overcome the actual disunity of the churches, in accordance with the teaching of the two scripture texts we've read this morning.

According to John's gospel, Jesus prayed that all his followers would be one and undivided. Also, the apostle Paul appealed to the church at Corinth that they would be of one mind and purpose.

But we Christians, down through history, have persistently failed to be united.

Sometimes we have merely tolerated each other, sometimes we've quarreled, sometimes we actually killed each other over religious differences.

There are actually hundreds of different Christian denominations in the world today, often competing with each other. This affects the credibility of the Christian faith with the outside world. As John's gospel says, we need to be one and undivided, "so that the world may believe."

First, let's consider for a few minutes the actual disunity of Christianity, both in history and in the present time. How did this disunity come about?

The first major schism among the churches happened in the 11th century, (1054 CE) about 1000 years ago, when the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches of the east separated – mainly over the question of authority of the pope. It was Rome versus Constantinople, a question of power: Who is the real boss of the Christian Church?

But then five hundred years later, in the 16th century, European Christians broke apart into two large camps: The Roman Catholics, under the pope of Rome, and various kinds of Protestants, who protested against the corruption of the Roman Church.

Protestants means ‘protesters’.

The priest Martin Luther in the 1500’s had protested against both false teaching, and practical corruption in the church. Luther’s protest was picked up and followed by many throughout Europe, and so began the Reformation.

It happened, at that time, partly because of the modern invention of the printing press, by which Luther’s ideas were promulgated widely; and partly because of a new awareness of distinct nationalities.

The Germans, both the church and political leaders, were newly aware of their language and culture; they were unwilling to be ruled from Rome. So it was both technology, and political nationalism, as well as theology, that made Europe ripe for the rupture of western Christianity.

It’s not surprising that the Protestants then divided among themselves, since they lived in separate places and spoke different languages. In that early modern context of developing nationalities, and new freedom of thought, different kinds of Protestants developed in different places.

There were Lutherans in Germany, but soon after that, Baptists and Mennonites also developed in Germany, rejecting infant baptism. In fact, different kinds of Baptists appeared in many places.

Lutheranism also spread to Scandinavia; but Reformed Christians – we might call them Calvinists – developed in France and Switzerland, the Netherlands and Scotland, mainly under the leadership of the French theologian John Calvin.

Then in England, Anglicanism took a different form under King Henry VIII, mainly for political reasons, though there were Christians in England in genuinely wanted Reformation as well.

Then an offshoot appeared out of the Church of England in the 17th century. That was the Puritans, some of whom developed into the Congregationalists, some of whom were among the first English people to immigrate to the United States.

All of these had slightly different theologies and practices, but all the Protestants agreed on most things: God the Creator, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, salvation to eternal life by grace alone; all rejected the authority of the pope, and emphasized instead of the authority of the Bible.

All of them allowed for the marriage of the clergy, reduced the power of the priests, and gave authority to lay people with democratic forms of governance. Further, they all set aside the Latin mass, and opted for their own national languages: German, French, English, Dutch, etc. These things were common among all the Protestants.

The main things they divided them was theology of the sacraments – the mode of Christ's presence in the holy communion, and the question of infant baptism.

All of that happened in western Europe in the 16th century, the 1500's. Most of our own ancestors, in various European countries, lived through these developments.

Just to complicate the story: 200 years later, in the 18th century, the Methodists developed as an offshoot out of the Anglican Church of England under the leadership of the Anglican priest, John Wesley.

The Methodists tended to be a working class movement within the Anglican church, but after Wesley died, the Methodists eventually formed into a separate church, which grew to be a large throughout the English speaking world.

Unfortunately, these different kinds of Protestants were never able to get together and live in unity, but tended to criticize and reject each other.

Catholics and Protestants historically have regarded each other as heretics, sometimes resorting to persecution and violence – like torturing people in the inquisition, burning people alive at the stake. What an atrocity – Christians torturing and killing each other over religious disagreements! This was the opposite of being 'united'.

It was like: We are right and you are wrong. We are going to heaven and you are going to hell because of your heresies.

Even among the Protestants, even though they agreed about so many things, distrust and disagreement often became intense. Sometimes their ethnic or nationalistic loyalties got mixed up with their religious loyalties.

So, disunity among Christians has not been a pretty picture. There were many good things in our Christian history, but our disunity makes us blush.

Now let's turn our attention to what happened in Canada.

When North America opened up to colonization, immigrants came here originally from France, and then from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. And what do you think? Of course they brought their religious divisions with them.

As you know, in Quebec, French settlers were Roman Catholic. But the English speaking colonists were mainly Protestant: Anglicans, Methodists and Congregationalists, all from England; Presbyterians mainly from Scotland. Baptists came from everywhere, and the Irish were both Catholic and Protestant.

Later there came Ukrainian Orthodox, and Dutch Reformed, and German Lutherans and Mennonites, among others.

What we had in Canada by the early 1900s was a great mix of different kinds of Christians from many places, with slightly different theologies, and different ethnicities, in a very thinly populated country, spread out over a huge geographical space.

So – a huge country with a small population, and too many churches.

As you know, in 1867 four colonies of the British Empire confederated to form one new country: the Dominion of Canada. Soon afterwards the west came into confederation, making one new nation, nine provinces, from coast to coast.

People began to say, with pride, we are a new country in the new world. We should have own new national church. Why don't we leave behind the petty divisions of Christianity from the old world, and develop a unique Canadian Christianity?

Let us be united, in order to build the Kingdom of God in Canada. Let us create a church fit to be called national. Let us unite together to build a righteous Christian nation under God.

They believed that the movement for unity was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Reading texts like John 17 and I Corinthians 1, they were convinced, the unity of the Christian Church was God's will.

It was an exciting idea that quickly attracted many people.

This idea was put forward as early as the 1880s by certain influential church leaders: first Anglicans, though that didn't go anywhere. Then, especially Presbyterians – both clergy and influential lay people.

High profile public intellectuals, like the principal of Queen's University and the president of the University of Toronto, both Presbyterians, publicly called for a united Protestant church.

The Congregationalists were a much smaller denomination; rejecting both bishops and presbyteries, they emphasized the autonomy of the individual local congregation and the

freedom and autonomy of every individual believer. They emphasized freedom of thought among Christians. They were a relatively liberal denomination, and were quickly on board for church union.

The other large church involved in church union was the Methodists, roughly the same size church as the Presbyterians. Many Methodists shared with the Presbyterians the same vision of unity – a national church and a Christian nation.

But there was another special emphasis among the Methodists which strengthened the church union movement. That was the Social Gospel. A movement or way of thinking most common among Methodists early in the 20th century.

The Social Gospel followed in the Methodist tradition of John Wesley. In England in the 18th century, Wesley had been an anti-slavery abolitionist, and very much focused his ministry on poor people.

Wesley rode his horse all over England evangelizing the new labourers of the Industrial Revolution, the miners, and the peasants. Wesley was a charismatic preacher who preached out in the open, with a warm message of the love and grace of God, offered to all alike through Jesus Christ. Crowds of thousands flocked to hear him.

Wesley and the Methodists, as the years went by, became known for their social conscience. They supported labour unions, and fought against child labour. They fought against drunkenness. They were also a people of prayer, regular prayer meetings, and warm devotion to Jesus.

Later, in early 20th century Canada, the Social Gospel movement, especially Methodists, fought for the social safety net – unemployment insurance, old age pensions, support for refugees and immigrants.

The Social Gospel was also a liberal theology which downplayed traditional doctrines, and emphasized social justice. A key Methodist theologian was Salem Bland, of Winnipeg, who wrote a book: “The New Christianity” in 1920.

Many Methodists were associated with the foundation of the political party, the CCF, like the Methodist minister, J. S. Woodsworth, first leader of the CCF. A non-Methodist social gospel preacher was Tommy Douglas, a Baptist, later leader of the NDP.

Now the Social Gospel movement was very much in favour of church union and backed it strongly. Social Gospel Christians believed that a united church could more effectively champion the causes of the poor, and of social justice in Canada.

However, there were other, very different factors and motivations that led to church union. One was financial. Yes, financial reasons for church union.

Many new towns and villages were scattered all over the rural areas of the country, especially in the prairies. Often a little town would have three or four tiny churches, all struggling to pay a minister, and to build, heat and maintain their buildings.

Just imagine a little town, say, in rural Manitoba. They've got a Methodist church on one corner of the main street, with about a twenty people, plus the children; and a Presbyterian church right across the street, with about twenty-five people, and a block away a tiny Anglican church, and around the corner a Baptist church with about ten people each.

They all had church treasurers, struggling to pay the bills. Just imagine the church treasurers getting together over a pot of tea.

Imagine a Presbyterian treasurer, a Scotsman who owned a grocery store, a practical down to earth guy; call him Angus. Angus says: "This is ridiculous. We all believe in the same God, and read the same Bible. Why not get one minister, and build one decent church building. Pay one minister. Heat one church, that's what I say."

The Methodist treasurer, a devout English woman, a farmer's wife, active in the Methodist Missionary Society and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. This was a Social Gospel lady. Call her Gertie.

Gertie says: "We all love the same Lord Jesus, and we're all filled with the same Holy Spirit. Why do we have to pray in different churches?"

"If we get together we'll have more money for missions. And think how much we can do for the poor folk if we do it together. Besides, if we're one big church we'll have more influence with the government. Then we can get rid of alcohol in our town! Yes, we should all get together in one church!"

You can be sure: church treasurers were a formidable force for church union.

The idea of church union caught fire and grew rapidly, especially in the west. By the time of church union in 1925, more than 1200 local union pastoral charges had formed spontaneously in these small places.

All of these unofficial local church unions enthusiastically supported the church union movement. And then joined into the new United Church in 1925.

So from early in the 20th century the idea of church union was widely supported among Anglo-Protestants.

It was evident from the beginning that the Roman Catholics would never be part of such a union. In fact, one of the motivations of Protestant leaders was to counter the growing influence of the Roman Catholic Church which was the largest of all the churches, especially in Quebec, but present everywhere else as well.

Some Protestant leaders feared the growing political and cultural power of Catholicism, and feared Canada becoming a Catholic country. They felt they needed a strong united Anglo-Protestant church to compete with it.

So the movement grew. But soon the Baptists let it be known that they were certainly not interested in being associated with churches that baptize infants.

The Anglicans were part of the discussions for awhile, but soon excluded themselves also. They would not give up their bishops, or their prayer books.

But in 1902 the Methodist Church took the initiative, and invited Presbyterians and Congregationalists to send representatives to meet on the question of church union.

In 1904 an official joint committee on church union met for the first time, with representatives appointed by the national ruling bodies of those three churches. This joint committee on union moved very quickly, demonstrating how enthusiastic and serious they were about this union.

By 1906 that committee had put together what is called the Basis of Union. It's remarkable how quickly that happened. It laid out how the new united church would be organized, and all the basic rules and regulations about congregations, and presbyteries and conferences and General Council. They were all ready to go as early as 1906.

The Basis of Union included the Twenty Articles of Doctrine, exhibiting theological compromises between Wesleyan Methodist, and Calvinist Presbyterian doctrines.

Between 1910 and 1912 the national ruling bodies of all three churches, Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregationalist, had approved the Articles of Doctrine, and the Basis of Union, and were ready to enter a national united church. Church union might have gone ahead, there and then. 1912.

But there were some impediments.

While the Methodist and Congregationalist churches were almost 100% for the union, with very little opposition, there was substantial, virulent opposition within the Presbyterian Church, with many individuals and congregations insisting that they would never agree to join such a union. At a number of General Assembly votes, about a third of the Presbyterians consistently opposed the union.

They said the church union idea was modernist, a new fangled, liberal thing built on theological compromises. Hardly a church at all, just a corporate merger, they said. Some considered that their church was the Scottish church, and saw the union as an English takeover.

A substantial minority of Presbyterians, including many ministers, objected strenuously to the new Statement of Doctrine. They were unwilling to drop their Westminster Confession, that is, their Presbyterian statement of doctrine from the 17th century.

For some folks, opposition to union was just a gut feeling of dislike for the other churches. Many Presbyterians felt that Methodist worship was uncouth. They felt that those Methodists were fanatics, their worship services noisy and overly emotional, lacking in dignity and reverence. They couldn't bear all those emotional Wesley hymns.

On the other hand, many Methodists felt that the Presbyterians were hardly religious at all, they were stuffy and formal, overly quiet in their worship.

Some folks felt so strongly about the question of church union, that families were broken up, friendships ended. Harsh and bitter words were spoken. It was very sad.

Because of this, the union was delayed, until greater support could be mobilized among the Presbyterians. The majority Presbyterians who favoured union appealed for time, to convince more of their members to come along.

In the meantime, World War I came along, in 1914, and church union was put off until after the war.

After the war ended in 1918, it was another seven years before the church union actually occurred. The pro-unionists were patiently waiting, hoping to draw in the recalcitrant Presbyterians.

Final votes occurred at the Presbyterian General Assembly, and the Methodist General Conference and the Congregationalist General Council. In the end, in 1924, the vote for the union was a huge majority among Methodists and Congregationalists, and among Presbyterians, a majority of about 2/3 of the General Assembly again voted for the union.

Since the vote was put to individual Presbyterian congregations, 784 local Presbyterian churches chose to remain outside the union. That was actually a small number, just 784 out of over 4,500 congregations. So in fact, the great majority of Presbyterian congregations, and people, actually came into the union.

The church union was approved by the Parliament of Canada and all the provincial legislatures, securing the new church's legal identity, and the transfer of properties.

The union was consummated and celebrated tumultuously, with great joy, at the Mutual Street Arena, Toronto, on June 10, 1925.

The highest office of the new United Church, would be the Presbyterian one: the Moderator, a modest, Presbyterian title, borrowed from the Church of Scotland.

The first Moderator of the new United Church was Rev. George Pidgeon, minister of Bloor St. Presbyterian Church, Toronto. The second Moderator, two years later, would be Rev. Samuel Chown, formerly the Methodist General Superintendent.

You can see the statistics of church union on the sheet inserted in your bulletin.

So, the new church, The United Church of Canada at the time of union, had 8,688 congregations, and about 600,000 members, made up of former Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist, and local union congregations.

The United Church of Canada, having brought together these three denominations, was now by far the largest Protestant church in the country.

The United Church continued to grow in subsequent years: in the census of 1931, the UCC had over 2 million members and adherents (i.e., people who identified in the census as UCC), and c. 20% of the whole Canadian population.

Now the United Church has always aspired to be a 'uniting' church. We've always hoped to expand the union, embracing other churches as well. Later, in 1968, we welcomed another small denomination, the Evangelical United Brethren.

The United Church has always been a "Big Tent" church. We are very diverse. As one of our anthems says it: "It's plain for all to see, we're as different as can be."

Church union has worked on this basic principle: "Unity in essential things; liberty in secondary things."

It was the Congregationalists who insisted, in 1925, that candidates for ordination to ministry do not have to agree with every word of the Articles of Doctrine. They have only to be in 'essential agreement.' This meant a considerable degree of theological freedom.

So union does not mean uniformity. Different congregations will still worship in different ways. Not all congregations look alike. They can differ in their worship styles and particular mission commitments.

We don't all have to agree about everything. We have evangelicals, and conservatives and liberals and radicals; we have firm believers, and seekers and doubters.

But in the United Church, over 100 years, we have learned to live together productively.

It would be another long story to discuss all the important contributions the United Church has made to Canadian society and the world beyond. It's demonstrable that the UCC has been a cutting edge presence in Canada.

Consider: The UCC was the first to ordain women, and later to ordain gay and lesbian folk, and performed same sex marriages; the UCC advocated for universal medical care back in the 1940s, opposed capital punishment, advocated for social welfare programs, called for action against climate change. We have multiple compassionate outreach programs and institutions across the country and support many around the world, through M & S. Many congregations support refugee families. Just to mention a few things.

Though efforts for organic union of denominations seems to have stalled, our church is involved in the Canadian Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. In fact we do many things together in league with other denominations.

Since the 1960s or so, relations between Catholics and Protestants has greatly improved. We no longer consign each other to hell.

Because of the shrinkage of our churches in recent decades, we sometimes find congregations of different denominations sharing space. That is, spontaneous interdenominational congregational unions are happening again in many places.

We live today in a very different world than 1925. We live in an increasingly secular and pluralistic society. As Christians we are more modest in our claims. We no longer speak of being a 'Christian nation'.

We no longer aspire to be the one big powerful national church. We are learning to live humbly as a minority people in a secular society, alongside numerous other denominations and religions.

We seek unity and cooperation now, not so much to exercise power, but to live as a servant people, reaching out to the world around us.

I believe we can be grateful for the vision of our forebears who brought our church into being, 100 years ago, guided, as they believed, by the Holy Spirit.

We have all been blessed, inspired and nurtured through this United Church of ours.

I close now with some beautiful words of a hymn that we will sing later:

“Let the servant church arise, a caring church that longs to be a partner in Christ’s sacrifice, and clothed in Christ’s humanity...

We have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord, to care for all without reserve, and spread Christ’s liberating Word.”

Harold Wells

