

Reflection – "Honouring the Past" — Rev. Tom Watson

It is truly an honour to be part of this special day, and to be invited to speak at it...and to talk about honouring the past.

My being here in this role came to pass in an interesting way. A few months ago, the committee was deliberating over who should speak. Someone said that since it's a 100th Anniversary service, they needed someone who's close to that age.

To which Christine Grose replied, "I know a guy. Tom Watson has to be dangerously close to a hundred."

Well, I'm not quite 100—the United Church of Canada came into being 12 years before I was born. But, starting with my childhood in Wheatley United Church, I have been part of the United Church all my life.

A Moment in History

June 10, 1925—Imagine being one of the 7,600 people packed into the old Mutual Street Arena in Toronto for the historic founding service of the United Church of Canada.

It was the day when Canada's largest Protestant denomination was created—when members of: The Methodist Church of Canada...The Congregational Union of Canada...The Association of Local Union Churches...and two-thirds of the Presbyterian Church in Canada...came together to form a more unified Protestant presence in Canada.

The birth of this new church was the culmination of 30 years of work. A key motivation was the belief that this unified church would better serve rural communities across the country. Communities such as those of the 11 United Churches here this morning.

The Stories That Have Shaped Us

It's an incredible story that we today. A unique story told by United Church folks all across this great nation.

There were some interesting moments along the way—two, in particular, stand out in my experience:

A Symbol of Unity in Manitoba

In 1979, when I was ordained, I was settled in Wawanesa, Manitoba. When I walked into the church for the first time, I thought, "Now, this is interesting." The building had two halves—one half physically attached to the other in an almost L-shape.

Why? Because when church union was established, the Presbyterian Church was literally moved and joined to the Methodist Church. It created a unique structure, but what could be a greater

symbol of coming together than physically uniting their two church buildings!

A More Complicated Union in Ontario

Of course, not all unions were that easy.

In 2007, I came out of retirement to serve in Sheffield, Ontario, east of Cambridge. The church, built in 1894, was Presbyterian at the time of union. Meanwhile, the Methodists had built their church directly across the street.

So, on the day of union in 1925, the Methodists marched across into the Presbyterian Church. But some Presbyterians said, "Not so fast!" They got up from their pews, headed across the street, and took over what had been the Methodist Church.

In that instance, church union was a point of division—tearing rifts that took years to mend.

However, in general, the stories we have shaped have been great ones.

Benchmarks in Our Journey

1936 – Lydia Gruchy became the first woman to be ordained.

1968 – The Evangelical United Brethren Churches joined the United Church of Canada.

1974 – Wilbur Howard became our first Black Moderator.

1986 – We apologized to Indigenous peoples for harm caused by the residential school system.

1988 – Sang Chul Lee became our first Asian-Canadian Moderator.

1988 – The General Council, meeting in Victoria, passed a motion declaring that "All members of the United Church, regardless of their sexual orientation, are eligible to be considered for ordered ministry."

That decision set off significant turmoil. When I returned home from that General Council, I received over 300 angry letters from across the country. One letter suggested that if I and Howie Mills, then General Secretary of the Church, resigned, the church might heal itself.

I will always remember Moderator Sang Chul Lee speaking at the first General Council Executive meeting after his election. He said, "I wake up in the morning, look in the mirror and ask, 'What's a nice guy like me doing in a job like this?'"

1992 – Stan McKay became our first Indigenous Moderator.

1992 – Tim Stevenson became the first openly gay person to be ordained.

2012 – Rev. Gary Patterson became our first openly gay Moderator.

These milestones—along with our progressive stands on social justice—are things we in the United Church can be proud of.

A Personal Lesson for the Church Today

I will conclude with a personal story that taught me a lesson which I think is a good lesson for our churches today.

I grew up on a farm along Highway 3, between Wheatley and Leamington. Every spring, strong winds would blow off Lake Erie, and when I was about eight years old, I thought it would be terrific to have a kite that could take advantage of those spring gusts.

So, I bugged my dad to make me a kite.

Now, my dad was greatly influenced by having lived through The Great Depression. It left him with two things:

- First of all, what it meant to live with shortages. And, as a farmer, that meant that when he fixed things he used whatever was lying around—usually binder twine or baling wire.
- Secondly, when Dad built something, it had to be strong. Built to last.

So, my kite was made from what he had lying around—tobacco lath, jute bag fabric, and binder twine. It was strong!

We waited for a windy day, ran like mad in the pasture field, and tried to get it airborne. But the kite was so heavy that it would have taken a hurricane for it to fly. It crashed again and again, until eventually, it broke completely.

I remember my dad saying, "Well, that didn't work. But we'll make another one someday."

Dad never did make me another kite. But what I learned that day was far more important than flying a kite: It is far better for something to go smash in the trying than to not try at all.

The lesson in that for us?

Being the church today is not as easy as it was in the 1950s or 1960s.

But the work we do is so incredibly important.

- Building communities that care for one another, for our neighbors, and for the world around us.
- Building communities that make the world a better place because we have been here.

The way we best honour the past is by keeping at the work to which we have been called.

So hang in there, folks. Keep at it. You have done, still do, and can always—even when it seems that this old kite won't still fly—make a difference.

Amen.