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WORSHIP LEADER – Cathy Stewart

SERMON: 'Summertime and the Living is Easy'

Once more, our scripture readings remind us what God expects of the people of God – justice and righteous says the passage from Isaiah; Hebrews calls us to faithfulness and endurance.

We, the people of God, known as the United Church of Canada, came into being with visions of social justice and evangelism, love and respect for the scriptures, faith that the spirit of God is active in the world and freedom to explore God's call to our time. From their beginning, the Local Union churches celebrated the 'furtherance of community life within the Kingdom of God'. The Union churches had as a principle that we seek unity in 'things essential' and respect liberty 'in things secondary.'

Well, how have we been doing? How well have we endured?

Last week we explored some of the grief and the glory that culminated in Church Union in 1925. Today we'll start with the 1930's and tell some of the stories of our church from then to the mid-seventies.

The Dirty Thirties

A.C. Forrest, p18 of Centennial Observer. "The Depression came and caught the fledgling United Church with very long supply lines to the frontiers. New churches had been started and ministers placed. A large deficit developed and as depression salaries declined, the church's pension fund got away out of balance. The United Church with its surplus of men went into debt and kept men on the fields during the depression. On the prairies it kept twice as many ministers on their charges during the drought and depression as all other Protestant denominations combined."

It took a while for the extent of the economic disaster to sink in. Nevertheless, some noticed the increased number of unemployed seeking church help in the winter of 29-30 and Saskatchewan had experienced two crop failures in a row. Moderator E.H. Oliver and others toured the drought-stricken prairies in the summer of '31. They were both frightened and aghast. The church set up the emergency Relief Committee to coordinate the ongoing efforts of individual congregations and work with the Red Cross and other organizations, complementing what little government help was available.

Individual women and men did most of the real work – running soup kitchens, raising relief funds, collecting and distributing used clothing. A woman from St. Andrew's, Moose Jaw recalls "our husbands used to say they slept in their clothes; otherwise we'd have carted them off to fill our shelves.

Many projects were started to help people help themselves. In Winnipeg, the Rev, Raymond Craig of Grace United started Canadian Goodwill Industries when a choir member, unemployed but not willing to go on welfare, came for help. Mr. Craig rented a nearby store. He and the choir member sorted the remains of a recent rummage sale and opened for business. In time, the company also ran a restaurant, a summer camp and two houses where men could stay in return for a few hours of work. "It wasn't charity but a chance." At First in Vancouver, Jeannie McDuff and her troop of workers fed 1,000 men a day. She received many requests for her picture – her minister named her the 'pin-up girl for the hungry and homeless.' She remembers great cauldrons of stew and hard work. "The women's arms ached, and their feet were tired and we took turns having a wee rest but I never heard a complaint. In those days there was something special about every bowl of soup we handed to a hungry man. We tried to make every man feel he was someone important." On prairie farms the local United church often became a community centre, a much-needed relief from the dreary hopelessness and isolation. All across Canada cent-a-meal mite boxes appeared on family tables to support the Missionary and Maintenance Fund [now M&S].

The work of relief was vital but the church also lobbied for a just socio-economic system. It called for old age pensions, fair employment standards and unemployment insurance.

In 1934 a movement uniting Christian faith and a concern for the social and economic crisis called the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order (FCSO) was organized. The CCF became a political voice.

The war years

After 1939, the women of the churches shut down their soup kitchens and started making bandages for the Red Cross, sending letters and parcels to soldiers, and arranging day care and meals for working women. Trying to get good used clothing to needy Britons during the blitz was hampered by an official policy which said only food, drink and war materials could be sent. The ladies of Westminster Church in Winnipeg shipped their parcels to Mrs. Vincent Massey, wife the then High Commissioner to London. Their shipment arrived safely the day after a major blitz and officials soon placed clothing on the priority list.

Heart-breaking losses and tales of heroism are part of the story of the war.

Many ministers enlisted as chaplains, 323 were serving at the end of the war.

Three UCC chaplains were killed and 19 were decorated. It was the padre's job to bury the dead and write letters to mothers, fathers, wives, sweethearts, brothers in other regiments and friends. My mother-in-law received such a letter.

Its gentle tone was some comfort to her in the loss of her husband; we still have the letter. Valuables were sent home, usables were given to pals. One mother, a member of St. Columba in Toronto received her son's bible. Looking through it she came to a marked passage in John, the Good shepherd passage.

Underlined were the words: 'I lay down my life. . . of my own free will.' Written in the margin: "My last message to my dear mother. I will never be far from you."

Another part of our war story is those who were conscientious objectors. Sixty-eight UCC ministers signed a Witness Against the War. The church supported CO'S who often then served as firefighters or in the medical corps. Most UCC people saw the war as something that had to be done and did their best to get it over with.

The UCC protested the internment of Japanese Canadians and the confiscation of their property. With 8 active Japanese-Canadian congregations and one about to open in Mission, the Church was certainly involved. Like so much else about our church, there were also many in our pews who were bigoted toward foreigners like Japanese or Italians. The war made such negative feelings suddenly patriotic and, to our shame, they were given free expression.

May, 1945 saw the end of the war in Europe. Four months later, atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the war with Japan ended. Another huge relief task faced the workers of the UCC, to help the needy and the refugees in the wounded lands of Europe and Asia.

The Fabulous Fifties were the summertime of our church life.

Early post war years were busy ones. Refugees from Europe and the expanding communist iron curtain flooded into Canada. Often a 'Church of All Nations', one of the UCC ethnic congregations, would help new Canadians get settled and find work. Anglo congregations could help with support and English lessons. There were lessons in tolerance and cultural diversity to be learned as well. Lois Wilson's congregation in North Winnipeg adopted a Hungarian couple. One Sunday they brought the minister a gift of an opened bottle of wine. Not only had they driven to church holding the open bottle but none had a driver's licence. Later the Wilsons helped when their landlord complained that they had been slaughtering chickens in their apartment. The congregation had never seen poverty before or given help to refugees. The future moderator thought it was good for them.

In those post-war boom years the dominant spirit was one of optimism and long-awaited prosperity. Having survived the war and the depression before it, Canadian,s including UCC members, were ready to work and innovate to make comfortable lives for themselves and their growing families. And the church grew right along with them.

At the height of a decade of church building, the United Church opened a new church, church hall or manse every week.

We were ready to embrace many new mechanical things – automobiles, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, airplanes. Medical advances like vaccination and penicillin became widely accepted. However, we were not anxious to have much change in our family, church or political life. Woman ministers were uncommon. Rev. Frances McLellan arrived to spend the summer in her first mission field and heard this exchange. Who is that? That is our new minister. The other replied I could have sworn it was a woman.

The church weathered a storm over relations with communist China. Then came the time in 1952 when the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was published.

The familiar version, the King James, was the one most Reform Christians had

learned from and held in great affection. However there were some who held the KJV as authoritative and any other version as the devil's work. One pastor in Vancouver, a Reverend Busch, burned a copy of the RSV in the pulpit. Thereafter he was known as the Burning Busch. Although the United church has a genius for accommodating divergent opinions, the interpretation of scripture seems to create deeper rifts. When biblical interpretation is linked with moral issues, rifts can become splits.

The Shifting Sixties

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 and the blossoming of biblical studies by 20th century luminaries such as Barth, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Brunner, Buber, DeChardin, Tillich, Niebuhr, Kueng, contributed new understandings of the Bible. In the sixties and early seventies our churches were crowded but many members did not know its basic beliefs or how to articulate their faith. There was a gap between what the minister knew of modern theology and what the people knew about the Bible. Into this gap the UCC released the New Curriculum. It was the product of years of consultation with ministers, Sunday school teachers, superintendents as well as theological colleges. After initial enthusiasm, criticisms began to appear. Was the introduction to theology in lay language too much, too soon? For neither the first nor the last time, the media hype was more irritating to UCC people than the New Curriculum.

1962 UCW union of the Women's Association with the Women's Missionary Society

1964 A plan of union is proposed jointly by London Conference and the Anglican Diocese of Huron.

1966 The United Church Renewal Fellowship is founded.

1968 Union with Evangelical United Brethren;

1968 Robert McClure elected our first lay Moderator.

1971 Red Hymn Book. [from anonymous scribe in PEI. The Hymn Book was not greeted with enthusiasm. . . too heavy. . . choir not impressed. . . tunes changed. . . in another forty years we will like the new book.]

Our church spoke out on issues like Vietnam, abortion, divorce reform, medicare. Al Forrest, editor of the Observer, in 1967, raised the issue of justice for Palestinians refugees in Israel.

It was during the 60's and early 70's that the church seriously wrestled with women in positions of power.

It was during the 60's and early 70's that new worship styles were introduced

Issues change but tensions remain. The tensions in our church have often been divisive. Though there have been dropouts with each issue, somehow our church, with God's help no doubt, has managed to keep the two extremes in communication with each other. One of our noted communicators, the Reverend Robert A. Wallace, wrote that this is made possible by two God-given traits of

this particular branch of God's church: the genius of the United Church for encompassing wide divergences of opinion, and its unique capacity for relating creatively to the secular world.

To these I would add our gift from the founding Union churches, that we aim for unity in things essential and allow liberty in things secondary. Next week, we will plumb our last 30 years of existence to see if our successes and failures have helped us determine which are things essential and which are things secondary. How will we be true to the spirit of Jesus in the 21st century. Can we trust that God is with us?