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A Resource for Congregations from Hamilton Conference Staff

RECLAIMING OUR PUBLIC SPACE

by Sue Jackson

At their October 2003 meeting, Hamilton Conference Executive identified “faithful public witness” as one of the four priorities of its mission. In this edition of Team Works, I invite you to think about what “faithful public witness” means for you and for the United Church of Canada. As part of the discovery process, I would like to share with you several insights that I gained while attending **Epiphany Explorations** at First Metropolitan United Church in Victoria, British Columbia, this past January.

What is Faithful Public Witness?

I confess that at one time I thought faithful public witness meant preaching on street corners. That seemed as embarrassing as having to fish in Ottawa sewers during frosh week at Carlton. It sure wasn’t something I felt called to do! Fortunately, I have been able to broaden my understanding and have added more images of what faithful public witness might mean:

- the woman at the well who, after being restored by her conversation with Jesus, runs to share her good news with the townsfolk and invites them to form their own relationship with the Messiah. (*John 4:5-42*)
- Gail carrying her peace placards outside Westcam where components for nuclear warheads are manufactured.
- John in the long-term care wing at the hospital at suppertime helping feed people and telling them stories of what’s going on in the world.
- our moderator and other General Council staff and volunteers meeting parliamentarians for breakfast to

discuss same sex marriage.

- a candlelight memorial for the Vancouver street women whose DNA was found on a Port Coquitlam farm.

I could add thousands more images—and I am sure that you could too! Here’s my working definition of faithful public witness: **People’s open response through words and actions to Christ’s call to love God and neighbour.**

There are many wonderful ways that humans can demonstrate this love; they are as varied as humanity itself! Even though we often fail to exhibit the height and depth of this love, we continue to believe that we are called to express our inner faith through our outward behaviour.

Faithful public witness covers a whole range of activities from evangelism, to taking a public stand for social, political and economic well-being, to living out the faith through acts of compassion and justice, to engaging in political debate, to performing a public religious rite that expresses compassion and concern for the most vulnerable. Some of these forms of faithful public witness raise a good deal of controversy among Christians including among members of the United Church of Canada (UCC). If you were uncomfortable with the inclusion of any item on my list of images of faithful public witness, you likely occupy a theological place to the right of where I locate myself. How each one of us interprets love of God and neighbour varies. For want of better words, we use labels of “Left” and “Right,” “conservative,” “liberal” and “mainstream” to categorize people’s theological space. Even though such labels are inadequate because they fail to reflect the nuances and complexity of people’s belief systems, they can sometimes be helpful in showing the relationships among them.

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“Faith of our Fathers”

Many of us began our faith journey in the conservative camp; we grew up in a time when there was no doubt in our minds that Canada was a Christian country. There was no problem, for example, in saying the Lord’s Prayer in schools or at other community functions because religious practices were acceptable in public locations. Given this situation, it was easy for people to drift into the assumption that their understanding of Christian beliefs, values, and social behaviour was appropriate and normative for everyone. “Christendom” is the usual label applied to this way of thinking. Though the Protestant-Catholic divide and some differences in religious practices within the protestant camp provided people with some evidence of diversity, for the most part Canadians tended to assume that the values of their religion were indeed evident in the nation’s public life.

Yet there have always been groups within the Christian community who avoided these assumptions of public righteousness much as the prophets of ancient Israel criticized their own people for their lack of faithful public witness in their day. In the 1920’s and 1930’s Canadian citizens were urged to work to establish a Christian Social Order and to undo social inequities; today our Conference president reminds us to work for God’s Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.” Throughout its history, the UCC has taken its commitment to faithful public witness very seriously and has had a respected and articulate voice in the public arena on matters of social policy.

Diversity Expands

Since the 1970’s, the make-up of Canada has changed radically. We have rapidly become a multicultural nation, blessed by people of diverse race, religion, culture and colour. For some Canadians, such diversity has not seemed a blessing; they would have preferred to remain faithful to the Christendom they knew and to keep Canada as it was when the make-up of our country seemed more homogeneous. Others, however, began to realize that such homogeneity was a myth that had glossed over real differences of culture and belief

and left some groups such as First Nations peoples with diminished power and advantage; many Canadians were ready to welcome diversity.

Willing or not, with or without ambiguity, both groups of Canadians as well as newcomers from other religions and cultures have been faced with the issue of how to express their religious identity in public in a multi-faith society. The solution that has evolved seems to be such that the moral commitments of faith traditions have been operative in public issues but the religious practices and faith stories that inspired them have been relegated to the private sphere. Gradually, the church has lost its place as the guardian of public morality and Christianity has been replaced by the general liberal values of secular humanism.

We have become so used to this state of affairs that we tend to get nervous when faith and public life come too close to each other. Remember a few years back, how alarmed many people were when Stockwell Day, with his outspoken religious commitment, became leader of the Reform Party in Canada! It was hard to figure out which upset people more—Mr. Day’s theology or the fact that he admitted that his faith was a determining factor in his political life. I suspect it was the latter; unfortunately Mr. Day’s theology was considered by many Christians and non-Christians to be representative of the whole Christian spectrum.

An American Comparison

The book *Fire and Ice* draws a picture of the trends at work in Canada and the United States that attack “the myth of converging values.” One of the areas where divergence is evident is in the area of religion’s place in the public arena; our neighbours to the south began as a nation with a firm commitment to secularism. The Founding Fathers of the U.S. spoke of the need for separation of church from state because they did not want people to lose the religious freedoms they had gained when they came to America; those early leaders deliberately encouraged a spirit of tolerance and secular humanism in the public sphere

in order to reduce the potential for conflict or domination among different religious groups.

Though the U.S., like Canada, has welcomed many immigrants, the American assumption has been that newcomers would be assimilated into the mainstream culture. Americans have not perceived the need to adapt to a multi-faith society; rather they have responded to the presence of other cultures and religions with a desire to affirm the strength of their own faith position and make it the dominant voice for the nation. Thus, Americans have grown away from the Founding Fathers' position of secularism and have espoused a commitment to maintaining the conservative roots of their faith. The U.S. now has a president who claims that his public policy is built on his Christian faith; he has many supporters in Congress and together they are working to promote as public policy their own religious values. In the Religious Right, loyalty to a conservative faith has been gathered into a political agenda for the whole nation.

So What?

The foregoing paragraphs have oversimplified the historical forces at work in Canada and the U.S. but I hope the picture painted in such broad strokes may help us see more clearly some of the differences between Canada and the U.S. In the public arena, Canada has seemingly become more secular whereas the U.S. has become more aligned with the Religious Right. In the U.S., the Christian Right now has the ability to mobilize sufficient numbers of people to interfere with the rule of law in the matter of Terri Schiavo. This is an indication of not merely the moral power but also the political power of the Religious Right. The outcome is that the Religious Right considers its promotion of the faith through political power as faithful public witness.

But many Christians both in the U.S. and in Canada do not agree with this position. Why are their voices not heard? Why this silence? What seems to be lacking is a countering argument by the religious mainstream. Conrad Brunk, a Mennonite theology professor at Victoria University in British Columbia, thinks this voice is absent because mainstream Christians have left it up to the secular humanists to speak for them. He believes that it's long past the time when mainstream Christians need to learn to speak out clearly about the faith that leads them to take particular stands on public issues.

Where does the United Church of Canada fit?

The UCC is not a monoculture; it is both our difficulty and our delight to include members all across the spectrum of Christianity. This makes it rather difficult to understand who speaks for our church as a whole. Often our official voice does not speak for the conservatives, so

within the UCC itself, these members usually feel marginalized. The voices that speak for and guide these people beyond their congregational life tend to come from conservative religious media and programs.

Those members of the UCC who locate themselves in the middle or to the left find a resonance with the official voice of the UCC but they are puzzled when the mainstream media fails to register this voice as different from the voice from the Right. It seems as if mainstream media feels that the UCC is a monoculture – and a conservative one at that!

Members of the UCC do not come from the Religious Right, even though there might be a few among us who may be comfortable with that position. There is considerable difference between the religious conservatism found in the UCC and the Religious Right in the U.S. According to *Fire and Ice*, Canada does not provide the appropriate social climate for conservatives to grow into a Canadian edition of the Religious Right.

In addition, according to Marcus Borg, we can make a distinction between two kinds of religious conservatives; one he calls “naïve” and the other “doctrinaire”. The first occurs in people who comfortably maintain their childhood faith into adulthood without seeing the need to change significantly. The latter occurs among those who translate the faith into statements about belief that must be rigorously followed. There are far fewer doctrinaire conservatives in the UCC than naïve, who often share with Christians to their left a primary focus on relationship with God and neighbour rather than a focus on correct belief.

Thus for most of us in the UCC, faithful public witness does not mean that we should return to the old assumptions of Christendom even though there may be times when some might wish to do so. “Christendom assumptions are inappropriate for a pluralist society such as Canada’s,” according to one of our former moderators, Lois Wilson; they do not faithfully express the love of God and our neighbour.

But if we do not align ourselves with the Religious Right, does that leave us in the camp of secular humanism? Not that secular humanism is such an awful place to be—but on its own, it seems a bit like the lowest common denominator that we learned about in math. It lacks the richness and dynamism of our faith tradition. The UCC does not believe that the Conservative Right represents the whole spectrum of Christianity. We have a heritage of strong commitment to programs of social justice and the well-being of all God's people. But if that's the case we have to ask why is it that we are so silent or invisible in

the public arena? Why is it that mainstream media thinks that conservative Christianity speaks for all Christians?

The UCC has not abandoned its commitment to faithful public witness even though its input into public policy does not appear to carry the same weight as it once did. In recent years, the UCC has formed partnerships with groups from other denominations, faiths, and secular communities that share a common cause with us for the flourishing of humanity and the earth. Groups within our General Council Office still research social and global issues from a faith perspective in order to provide resources for UCC members who are dealing with those matters within their own contexts. At this time in our history, however, many congregations and members see engaging in these issues as optional; they are caught up in matters that have priority for them and some have little time or energy to get involved in issues beyond their own congregations.

So what is our mandate?

Do we as UCC members need to do a better job of faithful public witness or are we content with the present picture? Our usual response of “actions speak louder than words” is a bit of a cop-out because even if our actions are appropriate, they don’t help people make the connections between their faith and the issues of the day.

We need to be clear that our mandate as Christians goes beyond personal morality and family values to witness to justice, life abundant, compassion and hope for all—and most especially for the most vulnerable. In the words of Lois Wilson, “If Jesus is Lord, then other things aren’t.” When we allow the economy of the free market to determine all aspects of public life, then it becomes an idol. We need to speak up when we observe that happening. Jesus preached a great deal about economic issues and painted a vision of the Kingdom of God—a community dedicated to the thriving of all people. As followers of the Way of Christ, we too need to address the larger social issues of poverty and injustice.

As Christians, Wilson feels that part of our faithful public witness involves being constantly watchful and even critical of government decisions. Because fewer Canadians are engaged in public politics nowadays, she feels that “power has been leaking away from the Canadian political process for the past 25 years.” Engaging in political debate and public action is not the same as controlling it. She is not urging us to become the Religious Left in Canadian politics. When we talk and plan with people of other political and religious persuasions, we are called to be respectful and open to them in the belief that God works through them as well as ourselves.

The UCC has learned that faithful public witness does not always lead to popularity. The stand taken on the issue of same-sex marriage is the most recent example of a position that is controversial not only among the Canadian public but among UCC members themselves. Our moderator, Peter Short, noted, “People say that the UCC has abandoned the Bible to welcome gays, work with non-Christians and focus on doing justice. But we do these things because we have read it. . . . We do not follow an ideology of multiculturalism. . . . We follow Jesus across the boundaries that divide.”

Where to begin?

Faithful public witness is a vocation for the whole Body of Christ; it’s not a one-person job. There is a danger of being demoralized when we see the enormous needs of the world and the tragedy and pain suffered by so many. Where to begin? I suggest you begin with yourself. Your talents, your life experience, your faith have made you aware of particular issues that need addressing. Talk about them with family, friends, and church members; get information that you need; find a scripture text that throws light and encouragement; together form an action plan.

Another good strategy is to join an Outreach Committee or an ecumenical group such as Kairos; not only will you find partners in the work of faithful public witness, you will be nurtured by the Spirit and wisdom of dedicated people.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” (*John 3:16*) We worship the One who sent Jesus because of love for the world. Faithful public witness is our way of loving the world.

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Resources

Mending the World, UCC 1997

Michael Adams, *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values*, (Penguin, 2003)

Kairos: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives:
www.kairoscanada.org

Lectures and discussion by the moderator Right Reverend Peter Short, Honourable Senator the Right Reverend Lois Wilson, the Honourable Bill Blakie, Marcus Borg, and Dr Conrad Brunk at **Epiphany Explorations**, First Metropolitan United Church, Victoria BC, January 2005.