

## **THE FORMATION OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA**

The spirit of fellowship, which has always been distinctive of Canadian life, found expression in the political union of Canada in 1867, and in a succession of unions within various branches of the Christian church from 1817 to the early years of the twentieth century. The four sections of Presbyterianism then existing united in 1875, taking the name "The Presbyterian Church in Canada"; the four sections of Methodism united in 1884, forming "The Methodist Church"; and the various Congregational churches organized "The Congregational Union of Canada" in 1906. The desire for wider fellowship and closer church relationships was expressed in 1874 by the Quebec Diocese of the Church of England in the appointment of a committee to promote church union, and by The Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec in a resolution in favour of union with other churches; in 1885 by the Ontario Provincial Synod of the Church of England inviting the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches to confer on church union, and arranging a conference the following year; in 1892 by the Presbyterian General Assembly approaching the Congregational Church, and in 1893 appointing a committee to confer with other churches on the general subject of church union; and in 1894 by the Methodist General Conference proposing a plan of federation of local congregations. These developments deepened the sense of Christian fellowship, revealed more clearly the hindrances to the Christian church through unnecessary overlapping in the work of its different branches, and prepared the way for various forms of co-operation.

The actual negotiations leading up to the consummation of Church Union on June 10th, 1925, began twenty-six years earlier, when the Presbyterian General Assembly, on the request of its Board of Home Missions, appointed a committee "to confer with representatives from other evangelical Churches, having power to enter into any arrangement with them that will tend to bring about a more satisfactory state of things in our Home Mission fields, so that the overlapping now complained of may be prevented." The General Board of Missions of The Methodist Church appointed a similar committee. After three joint meetings, an effective plan of co-operation was adopted.

The next step was taken by the Methodist General Conference in 1902, when it was declared that in its opinion the time was opportune for a definite movement, concentrating attention on, and aiming at, the organic union of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, The Congregational Churches of Canada, and The Methodist Church. It also resolved that it would regard with gratification a movement with this object in view, would facilitate the formulation of a Basis of Union, and would educate the people interested into that deeper spirit of unity and mutual concession on which the successful consummation of such movements ultimately depends. A committee on Church Union was appointed, "to confer with committees that may be appointed by such Churches, and report to the next General Conference."

Each of the Churches named appointed committees. The first meeting of the Joint Union Committee was held in Toronto, on April 21st, 1904. It reached the unanimous conclusion "that organic union is both desirable and practicable." The experience of the Canadian Churches, which had united their own various branches, was vitally related to certain positive spiritual convictions. Among these was the belief, held by these Churches in common, that the church is the body of Christ; that Canada's deepest need could be met only by Christ's gospel, and that, being by their very constitution and history uniting churches, their task of preaching his gospel and building his kingdom throughout the Dominion would be more effectively accomplished through organic union than as separate religious bodies. The Committee further commended the whole subject to the sympathetic and favourable consideration of the chief assemblies of the

Churches concerned, for such further action as they might deem wise and expedient. Following this meeting, a friendly letter was sent to the Church of England in Canada and the Baptist Churches in Canada, explaining the decisions already reached by the Joint Union Committee and extending cordial invitations to them to send delegates to participate in the further discussion of Church Union, should they consider it advisable to do so. These Churches replied in courteous terms, but did not appoint committees to participate in the negotiations.

The Joint Union Committee met year by year to consider the reports of its special Committees on Doctrine, Polity, the Ministry, Administration, and Law. In 1908 it agreed upon a Basis of Union. This was sent to the supreme courts of the three Churches with the recommendation that they submit it to their lower courts and to the membership of their respective Churches. The Basis as then prepared was approved in general by the supreme courts in 1909, 1910, and 1911, and referred to the lower courts and to the membership, according to the constitutional procedure of each Church.

Under this plan the vote was taken throughout these Churches. In the Presbyterian Church, 50 Presbyteries voted for approval and 20 Presbyteries non-approval (793 votes for and 496 against); in the Methodist Church, 11 Conferences voted for approval and 1 Conference non-approval (1,579 votes for and 270 against).

The vote of the elders, office bearers, and membership in the respective Churches was as follows. In the Congregational Church the vote was on the Basis, and, of 10,689 members, 2,933 voted for and 813 against. In the Presbyterian Church two questions were submitted, seeking the attitude first toward organic union and second toward the Basis. The vote on the first question was, of 9,675 elders, 6,245 voted for and 2,745 against; of 287,944 communicants, 106,755 voted for and 48,278 against; of adherents, 37,175 voted for and 14,174 against. The vote on the second question was 5,104 elders voted for and 2,197 against; 77,993 communicants voted for and 27,197 against; 27,756 adherents voted for and 10,316 against. In the Methodist Church the vote concerned the Basis only. The result of the vote was, of 29,820 officials, 23,475 voted for and 3,869 against; of 293,967 members 18 years of age and over, 150,841 voted for and 24,357 against; of 29,373 members under 18 years of age, 17,198 voted for and 2,615 against; of adherents, 42,115 voted for and 7,234 against.

Subsequent to these plebiscites, the supreme courts of the respective Churches adopted the following resolutions.

The Congregational Union, whose membership had voted some months previous to the vote in the other Churches, stated: "We consider the action already taken as sufficient and will now wait until the other negotiating bodies have had an opportunity of testing to a corresponding degree the feeling of their constituencies."

The Methodist General Conference Special Committee declared "that the Methodist Church is now prepared to proceed toward the Union of the three negotiating Churches on the Basis of Union heretofore agreed upon."

The Presbyterian General Assembly resolved "that in view of the extent of the minority, which is not yet convinced that organic union is the best method of expressing the unity sincerely desired by all, the Assembly deems it unwise to immediately proceed to consummate the union, but believes that by further conference and discussion practically unanimous action can be secured within a reasonable time."

The yearly meetings of the Joint Union Committee were continued. Progress towards consummation was continuously manifest. In 1914, acting upon suggestions from the negotiating Churches, the Basis was revised in some of its statements, and the name "The United Church of Canada," with the names of its courts, approved.

The Presbyterian General Assembly in 1915 approved the revised Basis of Union, and submitted it to the lower courts and membership with the following result: of 76 Presbyteries, 53 approved, 13 disapproved, 3 tied, 2 sent irrelevant returns, 1 rejected, and 4 did not reply; of pastoral charges, 1,331 approved and 494 disapproved; of elders, 7,066 approved and 3,822 disapproved; of communicants, 106,534 approved and 69,913 disapproved; of adherents, 36,942 approved and 20,004 disapproved. When this report was received, the General Assembly of 1916, by a vote of 406 for union and 90 against, resolved "that this General Assembly now resolves to unite with the Methodist Church, and the Congregational Churches of Canada, to constitute The United Church of Canada, on the Basis of Union approved by the General Assembly of 1915, and by the majority of Presbyteries since consulted under the Barrier Act; that a Committee be appointed to carry out the policy of the Assembly," and "report to the first Assembly following the end of the first year after the close of the War." In 1921 the General Assembly reached the decision "to take such steps as may be deemed best to consummate Church Union with the above named Churches as expeditiously as possible."

In the meantime, there came into existence in Western Canada a large number of local union churches, which formed "The General Council of Local Union Churches." From 1921 representatives of this Council were welcomed to the yearly meetings of the Joint Union Committee. The negotiating Churches also, in anticipation of organic union, developed practical plans of co-operation, including delimitation of territory, local church union by affiliation with one or other of these Churches, and other methods. By the year 1924 there were in union in various forms, and with the approval of the parent Churches, more than 1,200 pastoral charges, including in them not less than 3,000 congregations or worshipping units.

Draft bills for Parliament and legislatures were prepared and carefully considered during the years 1921 to 1924. These were approved by the supreme courts of the Churches. The necessary legislation was enacted in 1924 by the Parliament of Canada, and in 1924 to 1926 by the legislatures of the various provinces. The dominion United Church of Canada Act recites that The Presbyterian Church in Canada, The Methodist Church, and the Congregational Churches of Canada had represented that they had the right to unite without loss of their identity, and declares that the said Churches, "by their free and independent action, through their governing bodies and in accordance with their respective constitutions," had united to form The United Church of Canada. Congregations were given the right to decide by majority vote not to enter the Union. Those that voted non-concurrence retained their congregational property, and provision was made through the appointment of a dominion Commission by which they would receive their equitable share of the general property of the Church to which they formerly belonged. In certain provinces Commissions were appointed for the adjustment of cases of extreme hardship of minorities in relation to congregational property.

On June 10th, 1925, the union of the three Churches was solemnly consummated in the Mutual Street Arena, Toronto, in the presence of more than 8,000 members of the Church. The Basis of Union was formally signed by the chief officers of the supreme courts of the uniting Churches. This historic act was followed by prayer constituting the First General Council of The United Church of Canada (1925). This Council was composed of 350 Commissioners: the General Conference of The Methodist Church and the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada each having appointed 150; The Congregational Union of Canada having appointed 40;

and 10 having been appointed by The General Council of Local Union Churches. The Commissioners and the assembled Church members participated in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and in the service of hallowing and consummating the Union, as the three streams of Christian life flowed together and formed the United Church. The approximate strength of the United Church at the time of Union was 8,000 congregations, 600,000 members, and 3,800 ministers.

The concluding words of the final report of the Joint Union Committee are these: "We draw attention to the fact that the spirit of unity has characterized the Churches of Canada from the dawn of her history. Each of the Churches now uniting is itself a United Church. The present Union, now consummated, is but another step toward the wider union of Evangelical Churches, not only in Canada, but throughout the world."

From 1855 until 1874, the Wesleyan Methodists of Bermuda were organized as a District of the Wesleyan Conference of Eastern British America and became part of the Nova Scotia Conference when the Methodist Church of Canada was formed in 1874. As such, they passed into the legal corporation known as The Methodist Church, Canada, Newfoundland and Bermuda, when that church was formed in 1884. In 1925 a foreign religious corporation could not hold property in Bermuda, and various factors led the Methodists there to decide not to become part of The United Church of Canada. An arrangement was approved by the Fourth General Council (1930) whereby the Synod of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Bermuda affiliated with The United Church of Canada as a Presbytery of the Maritime Conference, without interference with the rights and powers conferred on the Synod by the Legislature of Bermuda.

A further significant step was indeed taken by the Twenty-Second General Council (1966) when it adopted unanimously the Plan of Union between the Canada Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and The United Church of Canada. The Plan was the result of extensive discussion between the two bodies. Urgency had been given to it by the impending union in the United States of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren to form the United Methodist Church. The Canadian negotiation was independent, but received encouragement and approval from the parent Evangelical United Brethren Church. The actual union took place at the beginning of January, 1968, and the service of inauguration took place in Zion (Evangelical United Brethren) Church, Kitchener, Ontario, on January 10th, 1968, although the Western Canadian Conference elected to stay out of the union, as did a very small number of ministers and congregations of the Canada Conference. The Canada Conference brought into the United Church 58 congregations, 9,898 members, and 40 ministers. Among the assets it brought to the United Church were two fine camp sites, at Silver Lake and Golden Lake.