

# Seeds for Our Future

## A Service in Celebration of the 99th Anniversary of The United Church of Canada as We Prepare to Turn 100

*Ahead of time, create a garden bed as a focal point in the worship space. Place rocks in it that are big enough to see from the back of the church. On each rock, write some words that symbolize The United Church of Canada’s past and present that need healing through confession (see the* [*Time for All Ages*](#_Time_for_All) *and the* [*Prayer of Confession*](#_Prayer_of_Confession) *for ideas).*

*If you have online worshippers, ahead of time invite them to find a rock, light a candle, and gather some soil in a cup.*

*We suggest that you distribute seed packets or bundles to people during communion. These will be part of the blessing.*

## Land Acknowledgement

(*We encourage you to write a Land and Peoples Acknowledgement that is appropriate to the particular land/territory/relationships where you minister and worship. At the end of it, add this common statement, read in unison by the people:*)

**All:We believe that our relationships with the Creator, the land, the people, the plants, and the animals are sacred.**

One:Let us honour these sacred relationships as we gather together to worship God. This service is one we share with churches across our denomination this day. We are one in the Spirit… (*insert anything else that will help people get a sense of the vision for this service*). Let us now join together in our Call to Worship, setting our intentions as we enter this Centennial year.

## Call to Worship

(*Use diverse voices, or if that is a challenge, use one.*)

Reader 1: From deep soil comes bold and daring growth.
 From the seeds of our past will come fresh new growth.

Reader 2: We come today to marvel at what has been harvested
 and prepare for what will come.

Reader 3: We come to celebrate where we are and where we have been.
 We come rejoicing with our ancestors in faith across generations:

Reader 1: The Methodists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians,

Reader 2: the Evangelical Brethren, and Local Union Churches,
and our full communion partners across this world:

Reader 3: The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea,

Reader 1: The United Church of Christ,

Reader 2: The United Church of Christ in the Philippines,

Reader 3: and The Disciples of Christ (Christian Church).

**All: We give thanks to God for the blessings of past, present, and future,
 and dare to plant these seeds of faith anew!**

## Opening Hymn

**“**Make a Joyful Noise,” *Voices United* 820

One:I invite you to rise in body or spirit as we sing “Make a Joyful Noise,” a paraphrase of Psalm 100. In doing so, we join our voices with our spiritual ancestors, who sang another paraphrase of this psalm as an introit to the Union service in 1925.

(*Or use ”This Is the Day,”* « *Voici le jour*  »,More Voices *122.*)

## Opening Prayer

One: Let us pray: Again and again, God, we come to this time and place with a song! Each day you give us a chance to begin anew: to drink deeply of your Spirit, to boldly follow in the Way of Jesus, and to dare to seek justice as we seek relationship with our neighbours and you. Again and again, God, you call us out of our old lives and into your new day.

And so, as we celebrate the 99th anniversary of this United Church of yours, help us to reflect back with clarity upon all that deserves to be celebrated, all that deserves to be lamented, and all that deserves to be let go. We are not perfect, God, but we are yours, and we trust that you are with us every day. This day, and always, help us to be good grain that is planted and tended by your love, so that in the year to come we may flourish in this time and place. **Amen.**

## Time for All Ages

(*This is to be done with the whole congregation—even if you have no children or youth with you in worship. It’s helpful to unpack confession as an act of faith, as well as receiving God’s Words of Assurance as we strive to move forward into the future in good ways with God and one another.*)

I want to tell you a story! In 1925 something kind of amazing happened. People who believed in God but had different ways of showing it decided that they were going to work together. There was excitement and passion about what would come, grief over what had been lost, and even worry and fear because a United Church like ours had never existed before. We were growing something new, hoping to seed God’s love into the world.

For almost 100 years the church has been planting. On anniversaries, we like to celebrate the harvest of our actions. Here are some things we are celebrating during this anniversary year:

* Love Is Louder: 2SLGBTQIA+ Advocacy
* Ministry with Children and Youth
* Arts, Architecture, and the Church
* The Indigenous Church
* Food Security, Justice, and Sustainability
* Justice and Advocacy
* Ecumenical and Interfaith Partnerships
* Emergency Relief and Disaster Response
* Becoming an Anti-Racist Church
* Celebrating the Ministry of Women
* Climate Justice
* Making a Difference through Public Engagement
* The United Church of Canada: A Faith for Today

(*Since you have a list of confessions, it might be good to also have a list of celebrations, some that people might not even know—many were mentioned in that initial meeting about the unique “identity” of the denomination. You’ll find monthly stories about these in June 2024 to June 2025 in the Centennial newsletter—*[*sign up today!*](https://united-church.us3.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=ff2087d5fde243a770ed893a8&id=016a20449c)*—and on united-church.ca/stories starting in June 2024.*)

Now, can you think of things that you would like to celebrate about the church? This church? How do we celebrate God’s presence, live with respect in Creation, love and serve others, seek justice and resist evil, and proclaim Jesus in our community and our world?

Anniversaries are opportunities to remember what we want to change going forward as well as celebrate what has grown well. We admit that there were times when the things that people have done in God’s name have been hurtful and harmful to others. And we admit that there are times when we don’t things that God would have had us do.

The life of the church is full of both the good things we experience and do and the ways that we miss the mark of living in loving ways—times when we foster beautiful flowers and other times we have neglected to tend our lives towards God’s love. In the church, we bring the things that don’t live up to God’s loving standards before God in prayer. We call this confession. It is one way of apologizing for what we have done and asking God to help us fix the relationships that have been hurt. We also ask God to help us do better going forward. Today we will begin the work of making more room for life to grow. We are going to remove some rocks from the soil of the future.

(*For churches with online worshippers*):As we remove these rocks, we invite you to hold your rock, thinking of the ways we need to make room for growth.

## Prayer of Confession

Your response when I point to you in this prayer is “Let us make room for love.” Let’s try it now: **Let us make room for love.**

Loving God, in the fields of our lives and the life of our church, not all of the ground is ready to receive your seeds of hope.

**Let us make room for love.**

There are places where the soil is so rocky that the good life you intended is choked.

**Let us make room for love.**

As we prepare for your new seeds, help us to clear the rocks and tend the ground on which we live.

**Let us make room for love.**

Receive our silent prayers as we confess our words, actions, and attitudes that have marred your good ground…

(*A time of silence*)

We name some of the obstacles that have impeded/prevented the seeds of love from flourishing:

(*A few people*—*perhaps representing various generations from your congregation*—*remove the stones while naming what is written on them. Please feel free to adapt the suggested list provided or add confessions related specifically to your community of faith. As the stones are named and removed, create a visible pile in a safe and central location. Once all of the stones are removed, the following is read:*)

**Stones of fear and hatred,** when we have taught hate instead of love (*e.g., White supremacy, moral superiority, homophobia, sexism, racism, antisemitism, ableism*).

**Stones of injustice and evil,** when we have oppressed other people (e*.g., forced adoption homes, Japanese internment camps, residential schools*).

**Stones of silence and ignorance,** when we have not boldly denounced injustice (*e.g., classism, advocacy work, environmental racism, colonialism, or failing to care for seeds that have been planted by misusing or failing to nurture the gifts of others*).

**Stones of pride and arrogance,** when we have prioritized power and possessions over the gospel and of people, when we have relied on ourselves and our own understandings, failing to live in community as the body of Christ.

**Stones of disrespect and cruelty,** when we have failed to reconcile and be in good relations with the earth and with each other.

(*You could invite people to add their own and to name specific local and regional laments.*

*After most of the rocks have been removed from the garden bed and made into a visible pile of stones:*)

As we reflect on this pile of stones, may they serve as a marker of where we have been, a remembrance of the things we wish to change, and a signpost for the direction in which we wish to travel together further.

**All: Gracious God, allow the fields of our hearts and lives to be gardens of your new hope and love. All of this we pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen.**

## Words of Assurance

One: Faced with this cairn of stones marking where we have been, may we remember, dear siblings, that God is slow to anger and full of compassion. Abounding in love, God offers forgiveness to all who humbly repent. Let us be confident of this:the Great Gardener who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

**All:** **Thanks be to God!**

## Hymn of Preparation

“When Seeds Falls on Good Soil,” VU 503
“Great is Thy Faithfulness,” VU 288

## Prayer of Illumination

Holy One, we believe you speak to us through the songs of birds and the wind in the trees, through the wisdom of living elders and our spiritual ancestors in faith. As we share these words of scripture today, God, may we receive what your Spirit is saying to the church. All of this we pray, in Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

## Psalm 33

(*Use the sung response from* Voices United *760, simply read the words. This version of the psalm includes many genders in the ways we name God. We encourage you to use all of them since the mystery of God is bigger than our language and truly beyond all our words.*)

Give thanks to the Holy One, you who love God,
for this is what you were created to do!
**Praise the Holy One with voice and song,
with stringed instruments, let our songs ring out loud and clear! *R***

For God’s words are trustworthy and true,
the Holy One is always faithful.
She loves justice and righteousness!
**All Creation sings of his unfailing love.
Creator spoke and the heavens were made,
galaxies and nebulas were the breath of their mouth.
They gathered the seas as into a jar,
and the depths were gathered as grain in a storehouse.**
May all Creation revere God through our living,
and all people honour her with their hearts, minds, and deeds. ***R***

For Creator spoke, and the world came to be!
You called forth, and Creation blossomed.
The nations may plan, but you laugh—
***your* plans are what last forever,**
**the purposes of *your* heart are planted within each generation.**
Blessed are those who follow the ways of God,
**the children who share life as your chosen family. *R***

For you, O God, are our hope, help, and home!
**In your love, our hearts rejoice,
and in your future, we place our trust.
May your blessing rest upon us, O God,
even as we hope in you. *R***

## Gospel Reading

John 12:20‒28
(Consider *using the* [*First Nations Version of the New Testament*](https://www.bible.com/versions/3633-FNVNT-first-nations-version) *or any other translation that suits your congregation.*)

## Anthem

“Ploughin’ in Hope” by Gord Oaks (call and response, can be adapted for solo/congregation or choral)
or
“Sower Song” by Mark Miller (good solo)
or
“Seeds” by Mark Burrows (two-part choral, ensemble, or duet)
or
“O God You Have Planted a Garden” by Andrew Donaldson

## Sermon

(*Here are some thoughts and ideas; the* [*sermon from the 1925 inauguration service*](https://united-church.ca/worship-theme/centennial-worship) *may also provide ideas. You may wish to conclude your sermon with A New Creed.*)

### Sermon Thoughts

* Penny Nelson, one of the co-writers for this service, comes from a small family farm in Alberta. When she asked her dad, a third-generation wheat farmer, what he thought about Jesus saying: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24), his response was:

Farmers know that seeds are only viable for so long. If you don’t plant those seeds within a certain time frame, the seeds actually die and you won’t get any crop from them. So, there’s no point in trying to save your seeds for posterity. If you hoard your seeds and never, ever plant them, they’re worthless.

And the same is true with our churches. I see people in pews who are so afraid of the church dying that they can’t see how their fear is actually killing the church. They aren’t willing to take their money and try planting something new; they just hold onto their money, and their congregation dies *because they didn’t even try to plant hope with the resources they have*. They aren’t willing to try new things because they feel the life of their congregation is so frail, but if they aren’t willing to let go of their fear of dying, they are just going to die anyway. And Jesus doesn’t call his followers to die for the sake of dying. He calls his followers to let go of our resources for the sake of growing hope and life all around us.

* On June 10, 1925, the Rev. Samuel Rose of Wesleyan Methodist College in Montreal [preached on this text](https://united-church.ca/worship-theme/centennial-worship) from John 12 for the inaugural worship service of The United Church of Canada. It may have seemed strange for the Rev. Rose to choose this text at the birth of the United Church, but he was prophetic in warning the new denomination that we are not called to live for the sake of our own gain, or even for the sake of perpetuating our own existence. Instead, the church is called to use our resources—our time, our talents, and our treasures of money and property—towards furthering the spread of God’s love, hope, peace, and joy in this world.
* As a denomination, we have been letting go and being reborn for a long time. This process of death and resurrection has been part of us from our beginnings. As we approach our 100th anniversary, it is a good time to reflect on what is being transformed in this moment and for this coming age. We trust that God is with us, even in the terrifying, life-changing moments of death and rebirth.

### Questions to Ponder

* What do we (as a congregation, as a region, as a denomination) need to celebrate and then let go of? What needs to die? What are the resources we have been given that we are hoarding?
* What hopes and joys are we called to plant in this world today? How are we called to plant the seeds of the gospel in our time and place?

### Suggested Readings

* Rev. T. Denise Anderson, “Commentary on John 12:20‒33,” in A Sanctified Art, [*Again and Again: A Devotional Booklet for Lent Year B*](https://sanctifiedart.org/again-and-again-lenten-devotional-booklet)*,* p. 32.
* Phyllis Airhart, “[The United Church, at 90, is at yet another historic crossroads](https://broadview.org/ucc-at-90/),” *Broadview* (June 1, 2015). This article reflects on how the United Church has lived into the themes of death and rebirth as preached in the Rev. Samuel Rose’s sermon on John 12 on June 10, 1925, time and again. In particular, we wish to lift up the third-last paragraph of the article for sermon writers (starting “What we do know”).
* Russell Daye and Robert C. Fennell,[*Turning Ourselves Inside Out: Thriving Christian Communities*](https://www.fortresspress.com/store/product/9781506470023/Turning-Ourselves-Inside-Out) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021). We commend the whole book to you, but particularly chapter 5, “Willingness to Risk: The Virtue of Courage,” and chapter 7, “Willingness to Be Turned Inside Out: The Virtue of Kenosis.”

## Offering

### Offertory Music

(*Consider sharing a new song or a musical offering such as “Today We All Are Called to Be Disciples,” VU 507; “We Have This Ministry,” VU 510; or “Grateful,” MV* *182.*)

## Prayer of Dedication

**Gracious God,
we believe that you are calling us forward into a new day.
We believe that you have a future for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** (*name your community of faith*), **and The United Church of Canada that is rooted in your abundant life,
and we trust you with this future,
even though it’s beyond the horizon of our dreams.
So, we offer you the blessings you have already given us—
our time, our talents, our finances, and our hopes—
so that you might use them and transform them for the good of your whole world.
May these gifts be a blessing to the people of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** (*name your community, town, area, etc.*) **and beyond!
All this we pray, in Jesus’ name.
Amen!**

## Sacrament of Communion

(*“In the Bulb There Is a Flower,” VU 703, is woven into this liturgy. If you prefer to use a beloved musical setting of the people’s responses, please adapt to do so. Or if music is a challenge, simply speak all the parts.*

*Invite people at home to get something to eat and drink as you prepare the table in the worship space.*)

The Lord be with you.
**And also with you!**
Present your heart forth to God.
**We open our hearts to God’s presence!**
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God!
**It is right to give God thanks and praise**.

Creator God, we praise you for all the goodness you have sown in this world.
From the beginning of time, you have planted love in your Creation
in all of our relations: the rocks and trees, the skies and seas,
the birds, the fish, the plants and the animals, and the people.
We are in awe and wonder of all that you have done.
But you didn’t stop there! Not only did you sow the seeds of love,
you also tended the ground in which they grew.
Among the people, you raised up leaders who nurtured people through your dream.
You anointed prophets and judges to hold out your dream and sought to pull the invasive weeds from our hearts.
Yet we often left our gardens untended, forgetting your original call and hope.
All that was created you intended and called to bear the fruit of life.
In remembrance of this original call, our hearts cry out to you.

**Holy, Holy, Holy God,
God of majesty and life,
heaven and earth are full of your glory!
Hosanna in the highest!
Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Living God.**

(*All sing verse 1 of “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.”*)

Despite your tender care, we still didn’t get your dream,
so in the fullness of time, you revealed yourself in the person of Jesus,
who came into the garden of your world to grow among us.
Jesus showed us what truly good fruit looked like,
and he did something that no other had done before.
He loved so widely and fully that his life force spread out
like the sun’s rays, nourishing life in all he touched.
Even though a bountiful harvest was freely given to all,
the parasites of fear and power rose in us, impeding our flourishing in your love.

On the night in which he was betrayed,
Jesus sat at the table with his followers and friends.
Celebrating the gifts of God’s love and freedom, they shared a meal together.
As they ate, he took the bread of freedom and life,
gave thanks to God, and gave it to his disciples, saying:
“Take this bread and eat. This is my body which is given for you.
Whenever you eat, remember me.”

And after supper, he took the cup of blessing, gave thanks to God,
and gave it to each of his disciples in turn, saying to them:
“Take this and drink. This is my life which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of all. Whenever you drink, remember me.”

In this simple meal, we see the full blossom of Jesus’ life, lived boldly and given freely. Nothing could stop his sharing of himself. Not even death could prevent love’s fruit.

(*Begin instrumental introduction to the second verse of the hymn.*)

And so, we proclaim the mystery of our faith:
**Christ has died, Christ is risen,
and Christ will come again so that his life and love might bear fruit in us.**

(*All sing verse 2 of “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.”*)

And so we join our hearts together in a moment of silent prayer
as we remember all whom you would have us share this meal with and all that weighs on our hearts: (*time of silence*)
Pour your Spirit upon us and upon these gifts, O God,
that we might be transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ.
Dying to our old ways, may we rise to life anew.
Through your presence, may the garden of your Creation flourish and thrive,
and the fruits we bear nourish others.

(*Begin instrumental introduction to the third verse of the hymn.*)

**Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory is yours, God most holy,
now and forever. Amen**

(*All sing verse 3 of “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.”*)

### Sharing of the Bread and Cup

When we share the bread together, we remember that Jesus was strongest and most powerful in his weakest and most vulnerable moments.

This broken loaf is the bread of life.

(*Bread is broken.*)

When we fill this cup, we remember the common cup and the abundant blessings that have been entrusted to us. This is the cup of blessing.

(*Wine is poured*.

*When all is ready:*)

The gifts of God for the People of God.
**Thanks be to God.**

(*People are invited to partake of communion in your usual manner. They receive seed packets/bundles during this time as well.*

*During communion, we suggest that you use some selections from the new hymnal. Here are some suggestions:*)

“Living Bread” by Lisa Waites
“Haleluyan”
“Beautiful Things” by Michael and Lisa Gungor
“I Have Decided to Follow Jesus”
“The World God Imagines” by David Kai

## Prayer after Communion

**All:Gracious God, thank you for all the ways you nourish and replenish our lives! For time spent with others at this table, for the life and teachings of your Son, and for your hope that grows daily in our hearts—thank you! Today and always, may we follow in the Way of Jesus, sowing seeds of grace ~~in~~ in deep, bold, and daring ways so that all Creation might be nourished by your love. All of this we pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen!**

## Prayers for the Church

God of the past, present and future,
from this moment, we are on the threshold.
The church is almost, but not yet, 100 years old.
As we remember backward to dream forward, help us to go ~~forward~~ forth to prune—
 gathering in all that is good and lovely,
 repairing the damage we find,
 lamenting that which has died and is dying.
Guide us through this year,
 so that in one year,
 we will witness how the seeds of today have blossomed.
Let this year be a time of preparation so that
 what you will grow in the next 100 years can take root.
All of this we pray, in Jesus’ name, Amen!

## Sending Hymn

“Sent Out in Jesus’ Name,” MV 212
“Go to the World,” VU 420
“Way Maker” by Sinach

## Blessing

As you leave this place, we invite you to care for and nurture the seeds that you have been given. Plant them here, or take them home.

Beloved, as you go into the world this day and this year,
may you receive this blessing as both gift and call:

Blessed are you who give your life to living deeply within the Spirit’s call,
 who long to be planted fully within the heart of Christ
 and to love God’s world with all your heart.
Blessed are you who give your life to bold discipleship:
 who plant the Saviour’s seeds of love, faith, hope, and joy,
 and trust that God will nurture these seeds
 with a future good beyond your imagining.

And blessed are you who give your life to daring justly for all Creation,
 you, whose heart breaks open like a seed in the earth
 as you give your life for the flourishing of all places and people.

Blessed are *we* who live this life and *give* this life,
 for we are not alone in this living and dying and rising again.
God is with us!
And we are blessed to be a blessing, now and always.
Thanks be to God! Let the people say, **Amen!**

*Liturgy by Penny Nelson and Michelle Armstrong, in consultation with Marcia McFee, PhD,* [*worshipdesignstudio.com*](http://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/)*.*

*The Rev. Penny Nelson and the Rev. Michelle Armstrong have been friends for over 20 years since they first met at a youth ministry event in Alberta Northwest Conference. They both studied at the Atlantic School of Theology and became ordained ministers in The United Church of Canada in 2013. They have created retreats and worship services together many times over the past 11 years.*

*The Rev. Penny Nelson is currently serving Avon United Church in Hantsport, NS, in an experimental growth ministry. Originally from a farm near Camrose, Alberta, she now lives in Wolfville, NS, with her wife and their beloved calico cat.*

*The Rev. Michelle Armstrong is currently serving St. Paul’s United Church in Fredericton, NB. Michelle’s roots with the United Church began in her 20s through campus ministries at the University of Calgary, and her love of God has taken her across the country to minister in Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, and New Brunswick. She lives with her husband and two children in Fredericton.*