

The Sound of a Church

by Kim Uyede-Kai

The pain of those of different racial and linguistic origins who have been excluded and marginalized needs to be heard with the heart, not just the head.

The first thundering boom of the barrel-size taiko drum startled the Thirty-fifth General Council into wakefulness in the darkened arena in Fergus, Ontario. Its steady, single drumbeat was joined by another different drum, then another, until the arena was filled with a clamorous tumult of throbbing rhythms.

Aboriginal sisters and brothers among the gathering knew the drum's rhythm even though it came from drums different than their own. The sound that called even late-rising commissioners running from their beds to see what was happening. When they arrived at the arena, they saw the drums and the drummers they expected to see. They also saw a space filled with people throbbing with sound.

A Painful Resonance

When the drumming stopped, each person in the room had both absorbed the sound and been its reverberating sounding board. Each stroke of a drumstick on tightly drawn skin had called the commissioners to hear a new way of being The United Church of Canada. To hear with their ears, with their hearts, with their whole being. And to be fully in community in the presence of the One who is the Sound.

My son was just five years old when he first heard the sound of a Japanese taiko drumming troupe. "It hurts my heart!" he screamed, clutching his chest. He thought that he was having a heart attack. He heard the drumbeats as more than a pounding in his ears. He felt them with his whole body as a sound too painful for his heart to hear.

In the beating of the drums at Fergus in 1994, I, too, felt a sound too painful for my heart to hear. Echoed in the drumming I heard the sound of the stories of those whose presence in the church was not seen or heard or fully felt: First Nations peoples; gays, lesbians and bisexuals; those who live with poverty; those who live with challenges of body, mind, spirit. And as I heard the sound of the stories of peoples of racial ethnic minority heritage, I heard my own story.

At that Council, the Feasibility Task Group on Ethnic Ministries proposed a model for a new national body to be called the Ethnic Ministries Council. Yet racial ethnic minorities with Methodist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian roots had been members of the United Church since Church Union. Like other Canadians who journeyed to this new land from other homelands, Black, Chinese, and Japanese peoples added the richness of their heritages to the heritages of Anglo-European peoples to found The United Church of Canada. This is my history.

Unfounded Assumptions

When I tell people that I am a third-generation member of the United Church I am often met with shock, sometimes with disbelief. People with Church Union roots are not expected to look like me. My Japanese features are usually interpreted to mean that I am an immigrant or perhaps raised by immigrant parents. In fact, on my mother's side my roots in Canada go back to 1900. My father's father was a staunch elder of

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his Methodist church in Victoria, B.C., long before the formation of The United Church of Canada in 1925.

United Church history has almost always been told from the majority perspective. The stories of minorities like my grandfather and many other women and men have rarely been included. The assumption that the United Church at its beginning did not include my grandfather is a silence I hear with my heart.

I do not know how my grandfather came to be Christian, how he came to the Methodist Church, or why he was so loyal to his United Church congregations. I only know that his faith community was so important to him that even when bowed by arthritis in his eighties, he conscientiously attended worship every Sunday morning.

Unlike my grandfather and many of my relatives who were active in Japanese congregations, my faith was formed in a suburban mainstream United Church congregation. There, I was grounded in the New Curriculum (which places me in a certain generation), Robert Raikes Sunday school attendance certificates, and our junior choir's rendition of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," accompanied by an acoustic guitar, a sanctuary instrument considered radical for its time.

I did not transfer my membership to the Japanese-Canadian English-speaking congregation that shared space with my grandfather's congregation until I was a young adult. There, the warmth of the community and its refreshing celebration of Japanese-Canadian culture in worship drew me. It was not unusual for the Rev. Ken Matsugu, the second-generation Japanese Canadian minister who was struggling to learn Japanese, to use his latest lesson in writing Japanese characters as the basis for his sermons. I knew that this, too, was The United Church of Canada.

Isolated by Language

My grandfather died over twenty years ago, before I could articulate questions to him to help me reclaim my Church Union heritage. Sadly, I remember few conversations with him while he was alive. I remember seeing him faithfully singing in his usual church pew every Sunday and sitting at his desk at home, writing award-winning haiku poetry. Language and words were important to him; they gave him life. Ironically, it was language that kept his church memories from me. His language was mostly Japanese. Mine is solely English because I was raised in an English-language home shared with my mother's Canadian-born, English-speaking, Buddhist father. The legacy of the English language classes and English language social services offered by the early church had so thoroughly succeeded, in tandem with post-war Canadian society's pressures for Japanese Canadians to "integrate," that few members of my generation can understand the Japanese of their grandparents.

Most ethnic minority congregations were initially formed for immigrants and their children, as a safe and comfortable place for community and family to worship in their familiar language and ethnic culture. In the early years of Christian mission to immigrants, English language classes and social advocacy in English-speaking Canadian society were the main tools of outreach. I felt a real moment of connection when I learned that the Welsh Dewi Sant United Church in Toronto shares this history with the early Asian congregations who became United Church.

English language classes replaced fluent Japanese with fluent English. It also helped reshape transplanted Japanese culture to "Canadian" cultural expectations. One legacy I inherited from my grandfather was his choice of the non-Japanese pronunciation of our surname, to accommodate English-speaking Canadians who could not pronounce Japanese sounds properly.

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My grandfather's faith was not Christian when he was born in Japan. Somewhere in his life, he became Christian. Like many early Japanese immigrants to Canada, he found the Methodist Church to be a community in which he could be sustained. His faithfulness to his church community and the God he came to love helped him through the very difficult years during the Second World War when he experienced the internment and relocation of Japanese Canadians.

Since Church Union, many racial/ethnic groups formed ethnic minority United Church congregations which worship in their original languages. Today, on any given Sunday, God is worshipped in Armenian, Akan, Cantonese, Finnish, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Lingala, Mandarin, Spanish, Swahili, Taiwanese, and Welsh, as well as in English and French.

Racial ethnic minorities contribute more to the life of the United Church than the sound of different tongues. The cultures and histories these communities honour are as diverse and as life-giving to the church as their languages. Some have been Christian for several generations; some are new to the Christian faith. They all contribute the creation of supportive communities that sustain their faith even in times of great struggle.

The Role of Racism

Although Christian conversion from non-Christian faiths was an overt expectation, racism was also a catalyst for congregational formation for many ethnic minorities. While common language brought Japanese and other non-English speaking immigrants together to form worshipping congregations, experiences of racism in Canadian society often forced them to draw on the strengths of each other. In their daily lives and in their neighbourhood churches, racial ethnic minorities were made to feel unwelcome and marginalized. Over ninety years ago, Union United Church in Montreal was founded out of the experiences of Blacks who were blatantly not welcome in White churches. Today it is exciting to visit Union and witness a vibrant United Church congregation that welcomes people from many different places, especially several Caribbean Islands and the countries of Africa, celebrates their cultures, and provides outreach services to communities that still face racism.

Racial prejudice shows up in other less vicious ways. Several years ago, a high-profile minister preached at a Japanese-Canadian congregation. He told a second-generation Japanese Canadian, English-speaking couple that their ethnic church should be a "stepping stone" to a "regular" congregation. With language no longer a barrier, he assumed they no longer had need their ethnic congregation. He encouraged them to join a majority congregation since nothing was preventing them from being one of "us." The implication was clear -- an ethnic minority congregation was inferior to a majority congregation; it was something to be outgrown, like a relic of childhood. (The couple occasionally feels pangs of guilt, years later, they still haven't "outgrown" their ethnic congregation, even though they have visited congregations in their neighbourhood with a serious thought to joining. They remained in their ethnic minority congregation because they have found community there.)

"Why do you stick to yourselves?" is frequently asked of members of ethnic minority congregations by both racial ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities who attend majority congregations. Racism can be heard in the paternalistic voice telling racial ethnic minorities that they have made it in the church when they no longer need an ethnic minority church. Racism says that United Church faith is expressed best in English or French vocabulary in the cultures of the Anglo-European majorities. Racism says that ethnic and cultural diversity is desired in majority congregations, provided that ethnic minorities never become that majority.

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Racism internalized can be heard when ethnic minorities in mainstream congregations think themselves superior, or more culturally adaptable, comfortable with, and accepted by the majority. They think of ethnic minority congregations as glorified cultural and linguistic ghettos for those who do not want to learn to change and adapt to Canadian culture or church. This attitude denies the fact that majority congregations also have their own ethnic identity and cultures. It perpetuates the misconception that there is a hierarchy of importance in the United Church, with ethnic majority congregations at the top and ethnic minority congregations at the bottom.

Sticking Together

Faith has many different cultural expressions, and God's loving presence is in each one. The living faith that sustains and supports ethnic minority communities is no less vital than the faith that lives in any other congregation. The Ethnic Ministries Council was inaugurated in 1996, not to create more racial ethnic hierarchy in the United Church but to find new ways of empowering the voices of ethnic minorities, to value their faith and faith communities in the church, and to hear their stories with hurting hearts. The Council also invites the majority church to come close enough to these stories to share their own.

We can all choose to "stick together," in the broadest possible sense, if those we choose to stick together with are as diverse as the people of the church are. The drums used in Fergus were only able to sound because the drum skins had been tightly drawn; they had a tension great enough to sound a call when struck. In the same way, ethnic minorities in the Church have been challenged to take the tensions of their marginalization, to use them to call to one another, and to resonate in the hearts of others.

My grandfather, Umekichi Uyede, is not heard among the throngs in the historical photos taken at the Mutual Street Arena in 1925. His face has never appeared on any later photo telling the story of who represents the United Church. But my memory of him sitting in his church pew is as loud and as steady in my heart as the most insistent drum that calls me to come running to join the gathering at the source of the sound. It tells me that I need to learn to listen with my whole being until the listening hurts my heart. Then will I hear the sound of all of The United Church of Canada.

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