

“We Still Believe!”
What does the United Church believe?
What does that mean for each of us?

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Acts 2.22-39 (selections)

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Peter announced to the crowd:

“Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs, which God performed through him among you. You yourselves know this. In accordance with God’s established plan and foreknowledge, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. God raised him up! God freed him from death’s dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him. . . .

“This Jesus, God raised up. We are all witnesses to that fact. He was exalted to God’s right side and received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit. He poured out this Spirit, and you are seeing and hearing the results of his having done so. . . .

“Therefore, let all Israel know beyond question that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. . . .

When the crowd heard this, they were deeply troubled. They said to Peter and the other apostles, *“Brothers, what should we do?”*

Peter replied, *“Change your hearts and lives. Each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you, your children, and for all who are far away—as many as the Lord our God invites.”*

Acts 2.22-24,32-33,36,37-39

Peter knew Jesus, personally. He spent years getting to know him. And then, with Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, and that morning with the Holy Spirit’s entry into the Christ-Community, Peter had to tell people what he had seen, what he had experienced, what he knew.

Gretta Vosper is my colleague, a fellow minister. She is an atheist, and very public about it. She serves a United Church congregation in Toronto’s east end. And now, a panel could decide whether her beliefs are outside the bounds of the United Church of Canada.

I don't know Gretta. I can't judge her case, so I won't. Her story raises interesting and maybe uncomfortable questions. What do we believe in the United Church? How much does each of us have to agree with whatever the UCC believes? Are there beliefs that would put us outside the UCC? Good questions!

II

Beliefs can work in different ways.

A church-community, or any group that believes things, can work like a circle. A circle has a border and a centre. A strong, clear border marks who is inside, and who is outside. Inside are those who believe what the group believes. Outside are those who do not. It is neat and simple. Except, life is rarely neat and simple.

So, we could instead keep the border so fuzzy and open that, really, there is no such thing as inside or outside. There is no boundary. We could decide not to have a centre either, no core beliefs. But with neither border nor centre, is it a circle anymore? Do people hold anything in common? How long can such a community hold together?

Beliefs matter. *Is the universe a creation that is good, or an accident? Are people made in the image of God? Is there more to life than just this life? Is there hope when we make a big mess of things? Who was (and is) Jesus?* How we think of these things, and many others, makes a difference. The Christian movement has ways of thinking about them. Within that, the United Church has our own particular slant on things.

An open circle has no boundary and no centre. A closed circle has a strong boundary and a clear centre. But is there another option? Could we have a circle with a centre, and fuzzy boundaries?¹

Picture a field. In the middle stands a pole. Think of the pole as the core beliefs we have: our teachings, our take on life, our doctrine. ("Doctrine" simply means "teaching.")

What matters is the pole at the centre of the field. Some stand very close to the pole. Their own beliefs fit tightly with the community's. Others stand further back; they're still part of the community.² And, some may be so far from the pole, they cannot see it. They might be in a different field! Are they part of the community?

In this picture, the important job is tending to the centre. We don't worry so much about policing the boundaries or digging a ditch.³

¹ Anthony B. Robinson, *What's Theology got to do with it?: Convictions, Vitality, and the Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2006), 33-35.

² I can't remember where I first heard this analogy. I think it was in something Rowan Williams wrote when he was Archbishop of Canterbury.

³ Robinson writes that the church-community's job "is not so much to police the boundaries as it is to define and articulate its centre. 'This is who we are and what we are about. You decide if this is right for you.'"

III

To complicate things . . . in the United Church we don't have one pole. We have four.

We have our founding constitution (*The Basis of Union*), which includes a section about what we believe.⁴ It dates from very early in the 20th century, so it might not be how I'd put things now.⁵ Still, it expresses very well some core truths we believe.

To this, we've added three other poles.⁶

The Statement of Faith in 1940.⁷ It speaks to a generation that had seen the Depression, the Great War, and was living a second World War. The *Statement* reflects their struggles.

A New Creed in 1968; it's since been revised twice.⁸ It was written as an alternative to the much older Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, though they still are part of our beliefs too.⁹

A Song in Faith in 2006.¹⁰ They wrote it to be "a verbal picture of what *The United Church of Canada* understands its faith to be at the beginning of the 21st century."¹¹ We need not all "sing" our faith in unison. Yet we can sing in harmony.¹²

Read all four, and you will see how different they are. We are diverse church!

You will also see how much they have in common:

- They all agree that we believe in God;
- They all agree that God is Trinity, whether expressed as "Father, Son, Holy Spirit" or some other way;
- They all celebrate Jesus in his humanity and his divinity, his reconciling death and resurrection, and his authority over us;
- They all say that our faith shapes our actions.

Robinson, 33.

⁴ www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements/union

⁵ While church union happened in 1925, the doctrine section of *The Basis of Union* was for the most part finished by 1908.

⁶ In 2012, we formalized the addition of *The Statement of Faith*, *A New Creed*, and *A Song of Faith* to our official teachings.

⁷ www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements/1940

⁸ www.united-church.ca/beliefs/creed

⁹ See William Haughton, "The Genesis and Evolution of A New Creed in the United Church of Canada," *Historical Papers 2011: The Canadian Society of Church History*: 5-19. He argues that *A New Creed* reflected a breakdown in consensus about what United Church people believe.

¹⁰ www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements/songfaith

¹¹ Michael Bourgeois, Connie denBok, Catherine Faith MacLean and John H. Young, *Our Words of Faith: Cherished, Honoured and Living* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2011), 20.

¹² *Ibid*, 21.

One more thing. Each of these statements is subordinate to the Bible. We trust God, and that God speaks to us in the Bible. These statements are guides. They say in different ways what we hear God saying to us in Scripture.¹³

IV

Do you have to believe in these to belong? No! You can believe there is no God, and belong here. You can be wrestling to figure things out. These statements might help. But you don't have to buy into them, to be part of what we're doing together.

Many folks become "members" of this congregation. "Member" is a formal expression of commitment and belonging. We do ask that members believe the basics. After all, members share in leadership and decision making. So we ask potential members:

*Do you believe in God,
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
and who works in us and others by the Spirit?*

*Desiring the freedom of newlife in Christ,
will you resist evil and live in love and justice.*

*Will you turn to Jesus, crucified and risen,
our Judge and our Hope
and accept him as you Saviour and Lord?¹⁴*

(You might recognize a lot of that from *A New Creed*.)

In other words, are you in the same field as the United Church? Are you looking toward the same poles at the centre?

What about ministers?

We have to be in "essential agreement" with the four statements. One of our theologians, Sandra Beardsall, says, "*This idea of essential agreement is a way to say that 'I accept these doctrines essentially, and that means I have the ability to use my*

¹³ The formal way of putting this is that these statements are "subordinate standards" to Scripture. For a good description of what this means, see Bourgeois et al, 5f.

¹⁴ These are the membership questions currently used in the Bethany and Elora congregations. We also ask a question of commitment:

*Will you join with your brothers and sisters in the church
to celebrate God's presence, live with respect in Creation,
love and serve others, and share Christ's life, work, and ministry?*

own reason and judgement as to how I interpret them, to some extent."¹⁵ You could say ministers have to be pretty close to the poles at the centre. We might disagree here and there, or put things a bit differently. Each of us is probably closer to one or two poles than the others. Still, close. And remember, these are subordinate to the Bible. We ministers have to agree that these statements express well that basic standard, the Scriptures.¹⁶

Why insist on this? Because as a minister, it is not about me. I represent you, the church-community. I represent the United Church. I represent the traditions of discovery, and reflection and proclamation we're part of. It goes all the way back to Peter in the Bible reading, giving that speech to the crowd. With Peter, my job is to say, *"This is what happened! This is what God has done, and is doing now in our time. This is what it means"* Peter said it for his crowd. I get to say it for you. If there came a time when I could not say it with honesty and confidence, then I would need to step aside.

I'm still here! What an honour, and joy, and trust it is to get to tell the story of Jesus, and the One he calls Father, and the Spirit who they pour on us. These doctrines are not stale, burdensome, or lifeless. Not to me. They help me tell the story well. And all of us to live out the story well.

Praise be to God! Amen.

¹⁵ Quoted in Mike Milne, "Essential Expectations," The United Church Observer (September 2015), 39.

¹⁶ Ibid.