

GROWING OUR FAITH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

I can't see or feel my own living brain at work. But I know it exists! I can't prove it, but I'm certain of it. Likewise, I know by faith that God exists even though I can't prove it scientifically.

Christian faith is our way of moving into the force field of God, and making sense of the world and our relationships within it. It's anchored in the timeless nature of God and in the belief that God loves us and can be trusted. It's built upon Old Testament prophecies that a Messiah would come, and New Testament beliefs that Jesus is that Messiah.

We express our faith through connection with God in prayer and meditation, but we also express it through Christian beliefs and actions. The New Creed, that we said in church today, is a faith statement of the United Church. We believe in and celebrate God's presence. We demonstrate that belief by loving, serving, and seeking justice for others.

We go from a shallow faith to a deeper faith by doing faith. It's hard work. As our faith grows, we become more aware of the deeper nature of Christ, and allow him to shape and mold our lives. Our faith reflects Jesus and reveals Him to the world. We live differently, and people around us see the difference.

The Christian faith has lasted for centuries because of its ability to adapt to the culture around it without losing its essential meaning.

In the mid 1960's, I taught in a remote First Nations community in northern Canada. There was no electricity or running water, no phones, roads, or even reliable radio service. Most families lived in one-room log cabins heated by a barrel

stove. They faithfully attended the local United Church and in them, I saw the real message of Christianity being lived.

The local gathering place was the band hall. They had dances and movies there, and everyone went. If they stayed up late, they slept in the next day. They were never in a hurry. They shared their grief openly and supported each other. If someone experienced a tragedy, everyone came to the band hall with food and stayed with the family for days. I learned the meaning of the word “harmony” by watching them. They went with the flow of the universe.

They noticed my way of doing things was different. I want to quote what they said to me back then, except that I’m going to use 21st century politically correct terminology. Keep in mind that the temperature up north got as cold as minus 50 Fahrenheit. They said “Caucasian puts on lots of clothes, goes for a walk, gets covered with sweat, stops for a break and takes off his jackets to cool down. First Nations person puts on one jacket, goes for a walk, warms up by exercising, stops for a break and puts on more clothes to stay warm. First Nations person is cold for a short time (until his body warms up by exercising); Caucasian is cold for a long time (from the time he starts sweating he starts losing heat).” What they said made perfect sense to me. To me, that was one example of how they lived in harmony with nature (and I didn’t!).

But the really interesting thing was how they had no trouble integrating the Christian faith into their spiritual traditions, without losing the essential meaning of either. They wore amulets around their necks as a form of spiritual protection against evil. When they killed a bear, they cut off its ear and placed it in a tree as an

offering to thank the spirit of the bear for giving its life to support them. And one family, when their father died, blocked the door to their cabin with logs, so his spirit couldn't enter the house, and then made a door in another wall. When two of my grade 1 students drowned, noone was allowed to swim in the lake for 3 days until the spirits of these dead girls had left the water. The children in my class started erasing the names of these girls from the sign out cards in our classroom library. One of the girls' names was Sally. I was teaching from the old Dick, Jane and Sally series of readers. They wouldn't read the name "Sally" when it appeared in the reader. Try reading this page without saying the word "Sally". "Oh, Sally. Come, come. Come, Sally, come. Oh see. See Sally go. Go, Sally, go. Go, go, go." Instead of honoring their traditions, I encouraged them to leave the names of the girls in the library cards, and to read the word "Sally". Now I think I'd say something like "OK. I understand. What would you like to do when you get to that word? Skip over it? Say another name?"

The United Church has been at the forefront of seeking justice for the marginalized and oppressed. It reexamined the role of women in society, supported them in their struggle for full gender equality, and affirmed their right and ability to make decisions, in discussion and relationship with others, around the issue of abortion. It has struggled for decades to find consensus within the church regarding a Christian understanding of human sexuality, including homosexuality.

A high school teacher once said to me: "Look at what society believes to be moral and just today – and you'll find the church adopting this as their creed in 10

years.” That worried me. If faith adapts to culture in a way that compromises its truth claims, then it becomes assimilated into the culture. An assimilated faith holds little attraction for those looking for transcendence.

But the question of how much to “adapt” a belief to the surrounding cultures has been, and continues to be, an ongoing and difficult one for people and institutions of faith. Christians are always applying new information to their interpretation of scripture. For centuries, for example, scripture was used to justify slavery, the subservient role of women in society, and the beliefs that divorce, abortion and homosexuality were sin. As societies matured and scientific research provided new information, the church began to reexamine and change its beliefs in these areas. If the new belief didn’t compromise moral principles, the church would embrace it, using language and concepts the culture can understand. If the new belief compromised moral principles, the church rejected it, speaking out vigorously against it. However, it didn’t reject a new belief simply because it was more comfortable with the old, or was afraid of change.

I wondered what safeguards the United Church had in place, when they formulated new faith statements, to ensure that they weren’t simply going along with the culture, so they could fit in, be popular, and not lose membership. When I researched this, I was impressed with the depth and thoroughness of its approach, as it wrestles with the challenges that are facing us as new technologies and beliefs emerge faster than we can keep up with them. One example is the complexity of issues surrounding the various ways that people who are suffering

from progressive or terminal illness can end their lives. Here are some examples – a doctor can withdraw medical treatment, patients can starve themselves to death, or self-administer a prescription their doctor has given them, or a doctor can administer it. Each of these levels presents us with increasingly complex moral, theological and legal issues.

I found out that the United Church is trying to formulate a position on the issues of physician-assisted dying. In September 2014, the Rev Bruce Gregersen, Senior Advisor in Theology and Faith for the United Church, wrote a paper titled *A Word to the Church on Assisted Dying*. He summarized how the United Church has tried to, and is continuing to, come to grips with this issue.

In 1995 the United Church supported withdrawing medical treatments that prolonged suffering without benefiting the patient, if the patient had a terminal illness and was competent to make that decision. It didn't believe assisted suicide was justified. An acceptable alternative for those who wanted to end their lives was to stop eating and drinking.

This position was consistent with the best prevailing social and medical opinions of the time. At that time, both passive and indirect euthanasia (ie withdrawing life support or administering pain meds that could bring on death) were ongoing debates. Now they are both considered appropriate care. Practices changed, not because of declining moral standards, but because experience showed that previous practices were detrimental to patient well-being.

Now the church is looking at physician-assisted suicide, in which a physician gives a prescription to a patient, who administers the meds on his own and

voluntary euthanasia, in which another person initiates the final action that results in death. It doesn't yet have a formal position on these issues.

The United Church believes it's our responsibility to engage morally and theologically with these issues. This is a complex process, which involves revisiting scripture and coming up with new interpretations of what scripture is talking about in those passages. It means looking at ways its ethical and moral perspectives have shifted to keep up with the times.

The United Church believes that life is sacred and must be valued and protected, but that death is part of the natural order of life. It also believes that people can, in relationship with God and others, look at their quality of life, and morally make a decision to end their lives. It also acknowledges the complexity of these decisions, especially when vulnerable people are involved. It wants to ensure that people will not be pressured to end their lives because they are an inconvenience to their families and society. Or that those who suffer from progressive diseases such as ALS won't choose to die prematurely because they know that eventually they won't be able to self-administer drugs to end their lives. Or that when those with Alzheimer's have lost all reasoning capacity, the decision about when they should die respects their pre-arranged wishes. And finally, if and when laws are changed to allow physician-assisted dying and voluntary euthanasia, the church has to decide whether to welcome or take a stand against laws that provide more options in end of life decision-making.

These are the types of situations that constantly challenge our faith. I'm glad the United Church has the courage to wrestle with these issues. My prayer is that we will continue to face them in a growing faith. Amen.