

PMM 4 ADOPTION TASK GROUP

Origin: Permanent Committee on Programs for Mission and Ministry

The Permanent Committee on Program for Mission and Ministry proposes:

That the Executive of the General Council:

Receive the report of the Adoption Task Group, make public the Archival Researcher report and

- 1. Direct the Theology and Inter-Church, Inter-Faith Committee to research and devise a position paper regarding adoption and create a United Church of Canada statement on adoption. Give consideration to other denominational statements on adoption and to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.**
- 2. Direct the General Secretary to:**
 - i. Develop liturgical resources to be used in acknowledgement of hurt and pain and the hope for healing related to the separation of families through adoption.**
 - ii. Invite faith communities to offer services of healing and reconciliation for pain and loss suffered through adoption practices. As well, encourage faith communities to offer services that recognize and honour parents who have lost children through adoption.**
 - iii. Encourage faith communities to provide opportunities for mothers and others affected by adoption practices to tell their stories to members and leaders of faith communities, with adequate counselling support available onsite.**
 - iv. Provide online resources on the United Church website directing individuals to appropriate organizations, groups, and resources that offer counselling and family reconciliation services as well as healing for those who have experienced pain through adoption practices and policies.**
 - v. Continue the use and monitoring of the My Story inbox as a way for those affected by adoption to tell their stories and receive a response. Devise opportunities to publicize its availability to families separated through adoption as well as adoptees and adoptive parents. Develop a voluntary pastoral care team to respond to individuals as requested.**
 - vi. Continue to work with colleagues from other denominations that operated maternity homes to determine joint actions, where possible.**
 - vii. Conduct further research regarding the implications and efficacy of:**

- a. A call for the retroactive opening of adoption records in all provinces and territories in collaboration with partners.**
- b. An apology to those adversely affected by historic adoption practices, and the role maternity homes operated by the United Church of Canada played in carrying out these practices**
- c. A call for a nationwide public inquiry into historic and present adoption practices.**

Background

Throughout the 19th and 20th century until the present, the United Church of Canada, its predecessors, and associated bodies have been involved with a wide range of social service and assistance facilities aimed at providing aid to various target populations, including unwed mothers. Some facilities were dedicated maternity facilities from inception, while others initially served all women in need and later narrowed their services to unwed mothers. Overall, the United Church was responsible, either solely or jointly, for five maternity homes, one postnatal care centre, and several other facilities that may have occasionally served unwed mothers. At church union, maternity homes belonging to uniting denominations were either taken over by the United Church or remained with the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Dedicated maternity homes of The United Church of Canada included: Victor Home (Toronto), Home for Girls (Burnaby), Church Home for Girls (Winnipeg), including McMillan House, an associated postnatal facility, Elizabeth House (Montreal) and Bethany House (Montreal). Additional United Church facilities that may have served expectant mothers but were not dedicated maternity homes included Mount View Social Service Home (Calgary), Maritime Home for Girls (Truro), Interprovincial Home for Young Women (Cloverdale, NB), Cedarvale School for Girls, (Georgetown, ON) and the Frances E. Willard Home for Girls (Toronto) that later became a joint Anglican-United Church project.

Initially, the purpose of maternity homes was to protect unwed mothers from the intense social stigma and poverty that could result from having a child outside of marriage, offer education about childbirth and care of infants, as well as some skill training.ⁱ While the general mission of providing shelter to this population remained constant, the policies, practices and services offered by the facilities changed significantly over the decades and varied considerably from facility to facility.

The time period from the 1940s to the 1980s was characterized by several coexisting trends that resulted in increased rates of adoption in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Canada. During this period, births to unmarried mothersⁱⁱ increased markedly, a trend that has been attributed to a combination of population growth, changing sexual mores, and restricted access to birth control.ⁱⁱⁱ Options for pregnant young women were also shaped by changes in social work and psychiatry, and public attitudes that condemned pregnancy outside marriage and viewed adoption as the best solution.^{iv} The prevailing view was that adoption was

best for all parties because babies were considered to be “blank slates.” It gave a new beginning to a child who would otherwise be stigmatized as “illegitimate,” and gave the mother an opportunity to return to her family and community unaffected by this perceived misstep. At the same time, the number of childless couples seeking to adopt increased. This increase in adoption is frequently attributed to the post-World War II idealization of the nuclear family and the resulting societal pressures on couples to have children.^v During a time when fertility treatments were for the most part ineffective or unavailable, adoption was seen as desirable. For maternity home residents in the 1940s to the ‘80s, these trends meant residents often believed they did not have the option of keeping their babies, although it had been a common choice in previous decades.

Of United Church maternity homes, only the Victor Home continues to operate. Incorporated as the Massey Centre for Women in 1989, it now provides a comprehensive range of programs and services for families and babies with a focus on pregnant and parenting teens. The centre offers early years and childcare programs, employment preparation services, community support services, an on-site secondary school, residential and transitional housing.

In the spring of 2010, Mary Anne Alton, a documentary film producer/director and council member at Beach United Church in Toronto, contacted the General Council Office about her film, *40 Year Secret*. The film documents the story of an unwed mother who describes being coerced into giving up her child while resident in a maternity home operated by the Salvation Army. During her research, Ms. Alton discovered that many women who had resided in church-sponsored maternity homes had similar stories.

The issue of the church’s role in adoptions was raised again in the spring of 2012 when a *National Post* reporter contacted the church about a series of articles she was writing on the topic. The articles followed the release of a major report by the Senate of Australia that documented the history of similar homes operating across Australia. The Australian Senate report led to acknowledging that the history of the homes included unethical and illegal practices involving in many cases coerced or forced adoptions. Consequently many churches in Australia, as well as the federal government apologized to the women and their families affected by coerced or forced adoption practices.

Following the *National Post* articles, Bruce Gregersen, General Council Officer: Programs, was interviewed and featured on a Global News *16x9* program on forced adoptions. As a result of these articles, the church opened contact with a number of groups representing mothers whose infants had been adopted from church-run maternity homes, including [Origins Canada](#)^{vi}, the [Forget-Me-Not Family Society](#)^{vii}, the [Canadian Council of Natural Mothers](#)^{viii}, and [Parent Finders Canada](#)^{ix}. At that time the United Church offered assurances that it would undertake archival research to explore adoption practices at United Church maternity homes.

A My Story email box was established in April of 2012 inviting women who had been residents of maternity homes operated by the United Church to share their stories. Information about this opportunity was published on the United Church of Canada website and disseminated amongst mothers’ groups. Just a handful of responses came from mothers who had been residents of

maternity homes as well as people within the church who had adopted children. A few more individuals also shared their stories through phone calls and private meetings.

Amy Crawford, Church in Mission Unit, has been coordinating ongoing contact with the mothers' groups and attended a national conference on adoption experiences held by Origins Canada in October 2012. In addition to meetings with representatives of mothers' groups, a meeting of ecumenical leaders and a panel of mothers associated with Origins Canada was hosted at the General Council Office in June 2012. Bruce Gregersen, Nora Sanders, and Amy Crawford attended. A second meeting with ecumenical leaders and representatives of Origins Canada was hosted at the Salvation Army Headquarters in May of 2013. Nora Sanders and Amy Crawford also attended this meeting. Work with ecumenical leaders continues and there was a meeting on September 10 2013 hosted at the General Council Office.

Amy also supervised the work of an archival researcher who was contracted to research the history of maternity homes governed by the United Church of Canada. The researcher reviewed materials available in the General Council Archives, the archives of Conferences that operated maternity homes, and the archives of the Massey Centre, formerly the Fred Victor Home for Girls. Three documents were produced as a result of that research: an overview of archival materials; accounts of women who resided in United Church of Canada maternity homes; and the researcher's own recommendations regarding further research that might be undertaken. [These documents are available to the PCPMM at the time of meeting. When the researcher made contact with former residents of United Church maternity homes, it was promised that the reports would be provided to them. To date these reports have not been released and a decision regarding their release needs to be made.]

The Adoptions Task Group was established by the General Council Executive and had its first meeting in March of 2013. Additionally, there were two conference calls in April, one in May, another face to face meeting in June, and a conference call in August. Members of the Task Group included Betty Fox (NL), Marilou Reeve (M&O), Laurel Walton (BC), and Sarah Harrington (appointed by PCPMM). Amy Crawford was lead staff for the task group, and other staff support came from Michael Blair, Bruce Gregersen, Mary-Francis Denis, and Cynthia Gunn.

The task group grappled deeply with the myriad issues related to the hurt experienced by unmarried, pregnant women who stayed in United Church maternity homes during the decades of 1940-1970. While it is primarily mothers who have brought the issue to the attention of media and the churches, the task group acknowledged that they could not ignore the many others (adopted children, fathers, grandparents, and other family members) who have also experienced loss through adoption practices.

The task group contemplated the historical, societal context that provided the rationale for the maternity homes and the many people within the church who have adopted children and have been adopted. The task group also considered the staff of maternity homes and the continued work of the Massey Centre, the only United Church residential centre still providing services for pregnant women, mothers, and their babies.

The task group recognizes that the issues of adoption, both in the past and the present, are much broader than the mandate and ministry of the United Church of Canada. Services provided by child welfare agencies and provincial health and social work officials are regulated by provincial laws. Additionally, shifting societal perspectives play a significant role in the experiences of individuals affected by adoption policies and practices.

The recommendations of the Task Group are influenced by an understanding of the identity of the United Church of Canada as a justice-seeking, justice-living church that is open to diversity and provides radical welcome to all. We are a church that recognizes when we could have done better. *A Song of Faith* reads, “The church has not always lived up to its vision. It requires the Spirit to reorient it...”

The church has been asked to consider the hurt caused to women who were young, vulnerable and pregnant, living in maternity homes operated by the United Church of Canada. Women have asked the church to consider the profound loss that they and their families experienced. The church must provide meaningful response to these requests.

The report and recommendations of the Adoption Task Group come at a time of comprehensive review of the structures and polity of the United Church of Canada. Coming out of the comprehensive review process, there will necessarily be the need for the Church, among other things, to mourn losses, celebrate identity and ascertain a more focused direction for the future. The General Council Executive has already been asked to make difficult financial and personnel decisions. Further difficult decisions will be necessary as the Comprehensive Review Task Group completes its work.

The Adoption Task Group recognizes that the issues facing the church now are numerous. We make the recommendations with consideration to the broader perspective and position in which the church now finds itself.

ⁱ Stewart, Gordon. “A Report and Recommendations regarding Projects in Community Service related to the Board of Evangelism and Social Service of the United Church of Canada” Apr. 1967, accession PAM HV 530 U5B81, p. 2, United Church of Canada General Council and Central Ontario Archives (UCCA).

ⁱⁱ Note: while there is some overlap in time period, this phenomena should not be confused with the “Sixties Scoop,” the practice of removing large numbers of aboriginal children from their families and giving them over to white middle-class parents. In most cases, the unmarried mothers named here were from white middle-class families.

ⁱⁱⁱ Petrie, Anne. *Gone to an Aunt's: Remembering Canada's Homes for Unwed Mothers*. Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1998.

^{iv} Solinger, Rickie. *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade*. NY: Routledge, 1992.

^v Chambers, Lori. *Misconceptions: Unmarried Motherhood and the Ontario Children of Unmarried Parents Act, 1921-1969*. University of Toronto Press, 2007.

^{vi} A volunteer-run non-profit organization serving people across Canada who have been separated from family members by adoption. Origins Canada provides local support groups, adoption reunion support, an adoption research reunion registry, confidential online support, and a wide-range of advocacy efforts.

^{vii} The Forget Me Not Family Society was formed for education, consultation, peer counseling and to offer support to all those touched by adoption. They encourage and develop a recognition of the benefits of family preservation and openness in adoption practice; operate a Post Adoption Resource Centre; and provide community education programs on post adoption issues.

^{viii} The Canadian Council of Natural Mothers seeks to expose the negative treatment of mothers, past and present, in adoption practice, process and law; advocates to unseal adoption records; is a voice for legal, systemic and social protection of mothers and their children; seeks reform of adoption and the elimination adoption promotion; validates the lived experiences of mothers and the negative impact of adoption loss in their lives; affirms the Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Spectrum caused by adoption loss for mothers and their children; and provides a voice of compassion and support for people separated by adoption.

^{ix} Parent Finders of Canada is a national volunteer-run organization that gives support and search assistance to birth parents of adoptees, adult adoptees and other birth and adoptive relatives, open to adult adoptees, foster parents, birth parents, and relatives. Volunteer services for members include: general peer counselling, assistance in search, providing intermediaries to make discreet first contact to the party being sought, and maintaining the Canadian Adoption Reunion Register.