

The Impact of One Sermon on The United Church of Canada

An Excerpt from *Moments in Time: Sermons from The United Church of Canada, 1910—2020*

A sermon is usually a congregational event situated in a worship service, connected to lectionary or other readings from scripture, as well as to other parts of the service such as prayers, hymns, and announcements. A sermon has a performative function. It is meant to do something, to make something happen. What follows will illustrate this by detailing the effect one sermon had on the United Church.

In the early 1990s, David Hallman preached frequently on eco-theological themes as a guest speaker in churches.¹ In August of 1990, he and Ursula Franklin focused on environmental issues as theme speakers at the UCCan's 33rd General Council in London, Ontario. By 1993, Hallman had written two books on eco-theology, and a third was on its way to publication.² One Sunday in 1993 or early 1994³, he was the guest preacher at Eglinton United Church in Toronto and spoke on the place of ecological concern in Christian faith.

Virginia (Geegee) Mills was in the congregation that day. Hallman's sermon provoked her to wonder: "If care of the earth is a central tenet of our faith, why is there no mention of this in our Creed?"⁴ Mills belonged to an environmental group composed of United Church members in the UCCan's Toronto Conference. She brought this idea to the group's next meeting. Out of the ensuing discussion came the idea of rectifying this lack with an addition to the UCCan's *A New Creed*. Such an addition requires approval by the UCCan's General Council or its Executive. One route to achieving this was by sending a resolution to General Council. Mills remembers that those involved "went through all the resolution hoops," and when it came to the General Council meeting the next August, it was passed.⁵

While the 35th General Council passed the resolution, it couldn't agree on the wording of the addition.⁶ With the Council unable to agree, Stan McKay was asked as sitting Moderator to consult with others and develop an appropriate wording.⁷ He remembered delegates from Keewatin Presbytery advocating that the addition speak of care and respect for Creation. After listening to the conversation at General Council and reflecting on what he heard there, the phrase "to live with respect in Creation" emerged for him as an appropriate wording. This addition was significant for Indigenous communities, as it meant the inclusion of an important aspect of Indigenous worldviews in *A New Creed*.⁸

There was some opposition to the idea of an addition to *A New Creed*. There was concern that if General Councils developed a habit of revising *A New Creed*, it might cease to be the widely representative and much-loved expression of the United Church's faith that it had become. However, there was no opposition to what the addition was intended to incorporate, and the idea of such an addition was received at General Council with a great deal of agreement and celebration.⁹

After the General Council meeting McKay consulted with former moderator and UCCan hymn writer Walter Farquharson, who recalled that the final selection of the words, "to live with respect in Creation," were probably made by McKay and him together.¹⁰ The proposed phrase then went to the Theology and Faith committee of the United Church, chaired at that time by Marilyn Legge. Peter Wyatt had just come on as the staff person for the committee. The committee thoroughly discussed the proposed addition, then forwarded their recommendation for its adoption to General Council Executive to confirm.¹¹ The Executive did so, and the phrase "to live with respect in Creation" was added to the *A New Creed*.

The United Church has a long tradition of summer camping and celebrating natural beauty, so what this addition expressed was not new to the spirituality of some UCCan members.¹² Still, while for some respect for Creation was part of Christian faith prior to the environmental movement, there has also been in the United Church a sense of Creation as raw material that receives value through being used by people in productive ways. Adding "to live with respect in Creation" to *A New Creed* explicitly acknowledged that Creation has a moral status independent of its use value, "and made abiding by this a matter of Christian confession, not individual choice."¹³ This was a significant development in the United Church's understanding of Christian faith and, in the wording chosen for the addition, an instance of reverse mission. Here, the choice of words for this addition to the UCCan's confession of faith was influenced by the views of some of its Indigenous members.

Many people and levels of church polity played various roles in this addition to *A New Creed*. The process by which this happened was begun by one person's preaching and another person's response to it.

ENDNOTES

- 1 David Hallman, email to Don Schweitzer, November 10, 2019.
- 2 David Hallman, *Caring for Creation: The Environmental Crisis, A Canadian Christian Call to Action* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1989); *A Place in Creation: Ecological Visions in Science, Religion, and Economics* (Toronto: UCPH, 1992); *Ecotheology: Voices From South and North*, edited by David Hallman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books/ Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994).
- 3 Neither Virginia Mills nor David Hallman could remember the exact date when he preached at Eglinton United Church.
- 4 Virginia Mills, email to Don Schweitzer, October 6, 2019. Mills was referring to the United Church's *A New Creed*.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 *Record of Proceedings: 35th General Council 1994* (The United Church of Canada, 1994), 526–527; 149–150.
- 7 Ibid, 150.
- 8 Stan McKay, telephone interview, March 8, 2021.
- 9 Walter Farquharson, telephone interview, March 8, 2021.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Peter Wyatt, email to Don Schweitzer, October 16, 2019.
- 12 For instance, Walter Farquharson's father was a grain farmer and had an orchard. For his father and others, a profound sense of respect and care for creation was a part of their Christian faith.
- 13 HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Don Schweitzer, *Mission and Migration: The Changing Mission Goals of The United Church of Canada and the Mission of Koreans Within It* (Nonsan, South Korea: Daejanggan Publisher, 2019), 53.



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