

The Collapse of the United Church of Canada by Robert Johansson

In 2018 at the age of 92, the United Church of Canada collapsed. We generally think of collapse as a metaphor with a picture of a building collapsing into rubble. Students of collapse define collapse a little less dramatically. Joseph Tainter defines it in this way: “A society has collapsed when it displays a rapid, significant loss of an established level of sociopolitical complexity.” It involves a radical simplification of a structure that has been operating for some time. The church had an established level of complexity that was established in 1925 and had been functioning for 92 years. Then the structure was radically simplified. From a four court church of Pastoral Charges, Presbyteries, Conferences and General Council, with a federal structure, each court having its own legal powers, it became a unitary church with only the central office in Toronto having legal authority. The new structure can best be understood as a franchise operation with annual meetings of the franchisees. Although the process of authorizing the collapse took three years, the collapse itself happened on December 31, 2018 when the Presbyteries and Conferences closed down, and on January 1, 2019 the new regional structure took over.

Loss of complexity is a result of loss of control, or failure of functioning. Although the collapse happened relatively quickly the collapse was preceded by a steady decline. Decline can be defined as a reduction in some measure of social functioning. Some of this decline can be attributed to changes in the environment. The social environment of Canada changed significantly. But part of the decline must also be attributed to a failure to adapt.

Corporate Culture – Loss of Control

A corporate culture is a control system and has four parts to its decision making process: a specific environment, a worldview that makes sense of that environment, a set of core values to evaluate changes in the environment, and a technology that acts on the environment to create positive changes. Challenges to the culture

can be found in changes in the environment, but failure to adapt can be located in three flaws in the decision making process: a faulty worldview, disastrous values, or inadequate technology.

The fundamental flaw in the United Church worldview was the assumption that Canadians were Christians and therefore the role of the church was to provide religious services for a Christian country. This meant that the church was not conceived of as a religious organization, but as a social service agency. It was developed as a church for the Canadian culture.

The result of this worldview was the negative judgment of evangelism. Whatever the United Church was it was not evangelical. Membership in the Christian church is by profession of faith, therefore it is fundamentally evangelical. The rejection of evangelism was the rejection of new members, and for any organization the rejection of new members is going to lead to decline. Anti-evangelism was a disastrous value.

The church did attempt a number of strategies for church growth. But the various attempts to develop a technology that would grow the church without being evangelical were failures.

A Brief History of the United Church of Canada

1925 – The Founding

The founding of the United Church of Canada was not based on faith but pragmatism. In the settlement of the Prairies little towns were going up everywhere. These little towns did not want to build a Presbyterian Church, a Methodist Church, and a Congregationalist church. They wanted to build a community church, a Union church. The assumption was that Canada was a Christian country, and if you were a Canadian then you were a Christian. The church was not seen as a faith community, but as a social service. The founders were extremely clear on this matter. They were forming a National church that would voluntarily become the established church. Thus the name for the new church was the United Church **of Canada**. The creation of the Canadian nation as a virtuous nation would be accomplished by the acceptance of British Protestant Victorian morality as the social morality of the new nation. The emphasis was not on the Christian

faith, but the Canadian community. In order to achieve union the individual denominations had to put aside any aspect of their faith that might cause controversy. The United Church of Canada was designed to be a cultural church.

The clergy of the United Church when they were ordained were subject to transfer and settlement. What that meant in practice was that they were sent to small prairie towns. Thus they began their ministry in the heart of the cultural church. They learned fairly quickly not to raise questions of faith, and to avoid any topic that might cause division.

New ordinands when they gave their message to Conference would not talk about God or faith, but about how much they loved “the church.”

1925-29 Early Growth

Canada was a growing country and the United Church grew with it. Union was viewed as a successful strategy. The UCC was the largest Protestant denomination.

1930-39 – The Great Depression

The Depression put stress on the church. There was a new stress on the Social Gospel. Membership declined. But in spite of the decline the United Church continued to see the small prairie towns as mission fields and went into debt in order to keep funding them.

1939-1945 – World War II

The war was a great boon for the church. Attendance began to increase, and the church began selling war bonds. You could support both the war and your church by buying a war bond and giving it to your church. The church managed to pay off their debt and grow a nice surplus.

1946-1966- The post-war boom

The 1950s was the age of respectability. People got married, bought houses, had babies, and went to church. Money came rolling in. New buildings were built. The Youth movement was

vibrant. The United Church helped sponsor the public rallies of the Canadian evangelist Charles Templeton. It is looked back on as the golden age.

1967 – The last good year

In the 1960s there was an attempt to create a union of the United Church and the Anglican Church. As a sign of good faith the two denominations developed a common Hymn Book. But the Anglicans wanted to retain their episcopal structure, and the Plan was rejected. It was the last serious attempt to create a united Protestant church that would be the voluntarily established church of Canada.

1968 – Canadian Society began to change radically.

The three pillars of the United Church of Canada, Victorian morality, the British Empire and the Protestant religion, all came under attack. The one that got the most press coverage was the sexual revolution. Sexual promiscuity was normalized. Homosexuality was removed from the criminal code. Divorce was made substantially easier.

The British Empire collapsed. Canadians no longer thought of themselves as part of the Empire. The Canadian constitution was patriated and Canada became fully independent. After a serious fight the old red ensign with the Union Jack in the corner was replaced by the maple leaf flag. The government announced its commitment to multi-culturalism.

Universities were expanding rapidly, and the philosophy of scientific materialism was becoming dominant. The Protestant church was becoming divided into the liberal Protestants who accepted a materialist philosophy, and conservatives who challenged modern science on the basis of Biblical authority. Liberal Protestants, on the other hand, came to define faith as a story, a meaningful fantasy. The victory of materialism also meant a growing individualism. Religious faith came to be defined as an individual's personal opinion. Although the Constitution still referred to "God," the idea of a national church became inconceivable. Secularism became the dominant political

philosophy.

The United Church of Canada had been designed for a Canada that no longer existed. The church struggled to adapt to the new realities, but went into a steady decline.

Dimensions of Decline

Like most institutions the church has resources of people and capital. As the church grew it added more capital, and more members, and developed a more complex structure. As the church declined it attempted at each point to stabilize at a lower level of functioning and a lower level of complexity.

Technological decline

The most visible symbol of the church is the church building. During the 1950s new churches and new Christian education buildings were being built across the country. As the church declined building slowed and then shifted to redevelopment and closure. Large empty churches were redeveloped as housing, or community spaces. Some were sold to make room for parking lots and condominiums.

Although the most visible technology is the building, the software technology of the church is the worship service. The move by the national church in the 1960s was to take the United Church, the quintessential White Anglo Saxon Protestant church and give it a Roman Catholic worship service. The first step was to downgrade the sermon. Protestant churches are churches of the word and the power is in the preaching. As a result the sermon was at the end. It was the climax of the service. The new liturgy put the sermon in the middle, to be followed by the eucharist. But since the UCC was a Protestant church the eucharist was only celebrated four times a year. This was then followed by adopting the Roman Catholic lectionary. This further downgraded the role of the preacher to a mere functionary. Instead of a powerful sermon the minister would give a priestly homily. Ministers stopped wearing the Geneva preaching gown, and began wearing the priestly alb.

The purpose of a worship service is to provide an experience of the holy, and to strengthen the faith of the congregation. The

changes to the liturgy managed to undermined both word and sacrament. Instead of a powerful challenge to the Roman Catholic church, the United Church had become a pale imitation.

Decline of Identity

Every organization needs an identity, a boundary that distinguishes members from non-members. There are two ways that this can be destroyed: by conquest from without, and by subversion from within. The Union of the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches erased the identity of the three churches, and replaced it with the new national identity. The new church saw as its purpose the assimilation of other Protestant denominations. Although, at Union, the United Church saw its main enemy as the Roman Catholic Church, there was never any threat of the Catholic Church assimilating them.

As it turned out the main enemy was scientific materialism. While the scientists were busy taking over the schools and the universities as training centres for their materialist worldview, the church was withdrawing. In Grade School children were taught that Science has proven that there is no God. The University taught that anyone who believes in God is stupid. The scientists set out to systematically eliminate the humanities. Now students are told that the only things they need to study are Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). As my granddaughter so wittily put it, "I don't believe in God. I believe in Science."

The advance of science changed the environment, but the church accommodated it. The church developed a New Creed (1968). The purpose of the creed was to correct the imbalance in the old creeds. The old creeds focused on God. The New Creed gave equal attention to the Church.

Any attempt to change the identity of an organization will create schism. There was a rebellion within the church from the more conservative Christians. In 1966 they formed the United Church Renewal Fellowship and attempted to promote a faith based approach. As the United Church moved steadily away from orthodoxy, the hope for renewal slowly died, and the membership of the UCRF steadily declined.

The difficulty faced by the conservatives was that they were calling for a return to a biblical basis of the church. The Protestant Reformation had replaced the authority of the Pope with the authority of the Bible. But Biblical scholarship had steadily undermined the idea that the Bible was infallible. The Bible describes a moment of creation. Science, on the other hand, insisted that the universe has always existed and is an unchanging reality. That doctrine has since been replaced by the Big Bang theory. Science insisted that evolution was a mindless random process of survival of the fittest. The conservatives did not have a convincing response to that and thus could be portrayed as irrational dogmatists.

The church moved to align its theology with materialism and the individualist model of society.

The acceptance of the new individualism left the United Church of Canada with no identity. In fact it considered having an identity to be “ecclesial arrogance,” a sin. Sin being defined as any challenge to the social value of multi-culturalism. It became the national church of a nation with no religious identity. The idea of evangelical conversion became meaningless since there was nothing to be converted to.

The idea of evangelical conversion was replaced by the doctrine of social conversion. The theology of love was replaced by the theology of social justice. The church leadership began to have a more radical anarchistic critique of Western culture which included the autonomy of women and sexual orientation, the rejection of assimilationists policies towards First Nations peoples, and the supersessionist view of Judaism, and the adoption of the vision of partnership rather than colonialism with other churches. The result was an ideological split in the church. There was a clear tension between the church of respectability and the church of a radical social critique. In the 1960s this was resolved by dividing the responsibility. The pastoral care of respectable social service was to be the province of the local clergy, and prophetic social criticism was to be the province of the higher courts of the church. This created a growing division between the congregational membership and the clerical leadership, and a growing mistrust of

the leadership. This culminated in the national office, facing criticisms of the comments of then Moderator Bill Phipps, announcing that the United Church clergy did not speak on behalf of the church. Bill Phipps, even as Moderator, could not be considered to represent the teaching authority of the church. It essentially repudiated the teaching authority of the church. A position in harmony with the new anarchism.

The end point came in 2018 when Toronto Conference settled its issues with Rev. Gretta Vosper, a self-proclaimed atheist, and she remained an ordained pastor in the United Church. The General Council Office responded that the United Church still believed in God. By which they meant that there was a document in the General Council Office that talked about God. As a cultural church in a secular culture there was no way that they could exclude atheists from ordained ministry or prevent them from preaching atheism from a United Church pulpit.

The decline of education.

A culture is passed on by the educational systems of the society. We often measure education in terms of years of schooling. But the more difficult measure is the ability of the educational system to produce the kind of talent that the society needs to deal with its persistent problems. The failure of the church's educational function was the failure to protect children and the failure to educate clergy. In the 1960s the United Church came out with a new Sunday School curriculum. It met with significant opposition because it was not viewed as biblically based. With the failure of the new curriculum the United Church was unable to come up with a Sunday School curriculum for its children. This was catastrophic. For Adult Christian education the church came up with the Kerygma Bible Study which was essentially a popularization of academic approaches to the study of the Bible. When I went to seminary in 1978 the main complaint was that the theology students were biblically illiterate.

Decline of Creativity

For Toynbee the decline of a civilization comes when the elite

is no longer a creative elite, it is merely a dominant elite. Decline is a social failure, a restriction of the imagination and a regimentation of the heart. Thus the declining resources led to a decline in creativity. The problem for the church was finding an evangelism that would answer the challenge of science. It failed to do that. Instead it stressed the theology of story, and turned to marketing techniques in an attempt to sell church membership to its target market. It became less tolerant of any attempt to do evangelism. The church has steadily become more doctrinaire, more rigid and more politically committed to individualism.

Decline of Time.

The secular movement was reflected in a decline of the church's control of time. Sunday shopping was introduced. Sunday sports began to replace Sunday services. The attendance at Sunday worship steadily declined. Christmas was redefined in materialist terms.

Territorial Decline.

The territory covered by the United Church began to decline. Congregations were amalgamed. Church buildings were sold. There were demographic changes. The small prairie towns that were the founding rationale of the UCC began to disappear. The claim of the United Church to being a national church was less valid.

Membership Decline.

Membership in the Christian church is primarily a function of evangelism. The church grows through conversion. One becomes a member of the church by make a public profession of faith. One source of conversion is through the family. The children are baptized as infants and then are confirmed as teenagers. The other source of conversion is through proselytizing, where people who are not members are attracted to the faith and become believers.

The primary functional measure is membership. The membership of the United Church of Canada went into decline in 1967 and continued steadily downward for the next fifty years.

The Crisis. The United Church Year Book would give all the statistics for the church. Thus anyone who bothered to look at the numbers could see that in 1968 the membership began to decline. The evidence of a membership decline was there in the yearbook every year. With the church leadership we can certainly identify a failure to anticipate. The trend line was fairly obvious, and fairly consistent. I could see it in 1984. I commented to the head of World Evangelism for the World Methodist Council that the United Church of Canada had been in decline for 17 years. "What are you doing about it?" he asked.

In 1978 the church did attempt to create an evangelism curriculum called *Telling My Story: Sharing My Faith*. The model of the church and the environment involved a misunderstanding that was present in the title. It assumed that church people were people of faith. One of my colleagues in seminary left the United Church because, as he reflected, "I could accept that the congregation wasn't Christian, but the Elders aren't Christian."

Which brings us to disastrous values. The reason I was talking to the head of World Evangelism for the World Methodist Council was because he had come to Winnipeg and no church in Winnipeg would have him as a guest preacher. As a result I hosted him at a couple of small rural congregations. The churches in Winnipeg did not want him because he was an evangelist. They thought that evangelism was a bad thing, certainly an embarrassing thing.

By the 1980s the church leadership considered evangelism an embarrassing thing. A significant part of this was due to the United Church being a cultural church. Doctrinal differences would be put aside in order to serve the community. As a result the doctrine of the United Church was never very dogmatic. The church was conceived of as a social institution, and not a religious institution.

Not only was the church not bringing in new converts, it was unable to keep its children. The sociologist Reginald W. Bibby did a survey of churches. He found that the main line churches like the United Church were in decline, and the evangelical churches were not. The difference was that the evangelical churches were not evangelizing, but they were keeping their children. As a result the median age of United Church members was gradually going up.

The church was declining because the members were dying. It was literally a dying church.

Economic Decline.

Money is another functional measure. This measure is a lagging indicator. While the number of identifiable givers was declining, the amount of money going to the national church remained relatively constant. Fewer and fewer people were giving more and more. It was not until the membership had been in decline for twenty-five years that givings to the national church declined, and the national church noticed the problem.

The contributions to the Mission and Service fund declined which meant less sharing and redistribution of resources.

The economic decline led to infrastructure decay. There was little new construction, old buildings were adapted, and subdivided. The great monumental churches began to decay. Buildings were sold. This made the institution less functional. Technology reverted to simpler forms. People moved on.

Decline of organization.

Collapse is a sociopolitical event. The previous central control declines. There was less overall coordination and organization of individuals and groups. There was a loss of cooperation. Divisions arose within the church. Theological divisions were represented by the United Church Renewal Fellowship, and moral concerns about gay marriage were represented by the Community of Concern.

Loss of complexity means a lower degree of stratification and social differentiation. There was a move in the church to combine the different orders of Ministry into one order. Organization was reduced to the lowest sustainable level. Congregations were amalgamated. Outreach organizations were amalgamated. Congregations became locally self-sufficient. Clergy became strangers or competitors. The world was smaller.

Beginning in the 1960s the church began to repudiate the Order of Ministry, and ministerial leadership. A report in 1980 explicitly repudiated the Order of Ministry by proclaiming that all church members were part of the order of ministry. In line with anarchist

ideology it was a repudiation of leadership. Leadership was to magically “emerge” from the councillor mind.

There was a loss of flow of information between the General Council and the members of the congregations. There was a general mistrust of the national leadership.

Decline of Communication

In the 1960s the United Church sold off Ryerson Press which had been one of the major Canadian publishers. The national office participated in the cable system expansion by helping to sponsor a religious cable channel for religious programming called Vision TV. They also sponsored a television program called Spirit Connection. But the period of decline was also marked by the breakdown in communication between the national church and the local congregations. Part of this was due to the redefinition of the clergy from denominational clergy to congregational employees. There was therefore little incentive for the local congregations to care about the national church or the positions it took on various issues.

The primary means of communication was the magazine the United Church Observer. In 1986 it was spun off, and independently incorporated. It views itself as an independent magazine and does not speak as an official voice of the denomination.

2000 - Emerging Spirit – the last desperate gamble.

In the Millenium the church did come to recognize the problem, and it developed a response. In 2000 the United Church of Canada received the Morrison Bequest of \$20 million dollars. Half of the money was devoted to a church growth outreach program called Emerging Spirit, and it tried to create an image of the United Church as a progressive church that did not take religion too seriously. One of the advertisements had a bobble headed Jesus. The consultants said that people were willing to come to a church like the United Church but they did not believe that it existed. The consultants also recommended a campaign of magazine ads. Combined with the advertising was also a program

to encourage congregations to be more welcoming. The problem was that the picture of the church that the consultants were using was the picture presented by the national office. It did not actually reflect the reality in the congregations. The members who were still attending and contributing tended to be people who took their religion seriously.

When the campaign was evaluated later the designers explained that evaluating or even defining success had not been a concern in designing the campaign. A successful campaign might be seen as evangelism, and they did not want to be mistaken for evangelicals.

It was when the national office had to cut its staff by half that the problem became a crisis. Contributions to National Office were voluntary contributions. When they asked consultants about a fund-raising campaign, the consultants told them it would be a waste of time because the general membership did not trust the National Office. The National Office began to look for a way to assess congregations a fee. The solution was to radically restructure the church to eliminate the four court federal system, and centralize all power in Toronto. Congregations would now be assessed a fee by National Office. Under the Deeds of Model Trust system all congregational property was held in trust for “the church.” With the new structure it meant that “the church” was now the National Office. The property of all closing congregations could now be administered by Toronto. The problem of funding national office had been solved for the immediate future.

Arnold Toynbee argues collapse is a failure of leadership. The creative minority becomes a dominant minority. Unable to creatively solve the problems facing the society, the leadership turns to coercion. You can look at the restructuring of the church as just a way for the people in Toronto to keep their jobs, but that would be a very cynical way to look at it. The consultation process meant that the restructuring had broad support and was generally considered to be in the best interests of the church.

In 2015 the General Council accepted proposals for completely restructuring the Church and sent them out for ratification (remits) to the Presbyteries and Congregations. The remits for restructuring

were approved, and by the end of 2018 the church had collapsed.

But the problem of church decline remains unsolved. Also the mid-level judicatory that would normally be the source of renewal was eliminated. Presbytery had voted itself out of existence. Church resources would now be funnelled into National Office. The church had become a more efficient administrator of decline.

Collapse

Every society is a transient thing, and it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Sometimes an institution just runs out of time. A specific social strategy is time limited. The United Church of Canada was a church designed for the Edwardian age: the high point of the British Empire with its confidence in British Protestant culture and the civilizing mission of the church. Time took away the British Empire, and replaced Protestant culture with a secular culture,

A society at the beginning establishes a dynamic motion along a course of change and growth, mankind once more on the move. The United Church of the 1950s was a growing church. Then it begins to slow down. It reaches a turning point where it begins to decline. The church faces a serious environmental problem. Canada became a multicultural and secular society. It has no place for a national church. The membership decline of the United Church began in 1968. The decline elicited a response: an attempt to grow the church. It was an unsuccessful response. It led to a crisis. This generated another response. This time an attempt to use modern marketing consultants to develop a plan for selling the church. This response failed. The leadership then organized a collapse of the structure with all the power centralized in Toronto. This is not a solution to the core problem of being a cultural church in a secular culture and it will lead to another crisis.

Hope

Is there a creative solution for the problems facing the church?

The primary enemy of the church is materialism. The church faces the triumph of scientific materialism in the culture and in the church. Materialism argues that only matter and energy are real.

The appropriate response is holism. Holism argues that not only are matter and energy real, but also the intangibles of love, compassion and belonging are real. The gospel is holistic. The enemies of the gospel do not denounce love, compassion and belonging, they just say that they are not really real. They call them nice stories.

The mission of the church is and always has been the apostolic mission to spread the good news, the gospel message of the forgiveness of sins. Christ died for our sins and on the third day rose from the dead. This is the message that was preached to you; that you believed; and by which you are being saved. John baptized with water for the remission of sins, but Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit. The holy spirit is love. The church must rediscover the holy. The holy is that which is set apart for the service of God. The problem is that the experience of the holy is also an experience of our inadequacy and sin. We can be in the presence of the holy only because of the forgiveness of sins.

The gospel requires a decision to have faith in a living God who loves the world, and to reject the materialism that we were trained up in. It means to meet the God who is present to us in Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Christianity is profoundly individualistic because it sees faith as an individual decision. But it is also deeply communal, because it calls people into a community of faith. Thus renewal is not simply the call to individual faith, but also the call to create a loving community where faith is nurtured and sustained. Strong communities require strong leadership, teamwork, and a mission focus.

There are two difficulties with church renewal. One is the almost insuperable task of convincing church people that what they pretend to believe is actually true. The second difficulty is that people are comfortable with the ways things are, and they don't want to change. Therefore any movement from a focus on comforting the comfortable to a focus on mission will be met with stiff resistance.

Renewal is to call people to make a decision to follow Jesus and his way of love, and to reject our society's worship of greed,

selfishness and economic growth. The gospel is deeply counter-cultural. Being a cultural church is not a viable option, because the values of our culture are not the values of Jesus. Many people will choose to acquiesce in the cultural path, but the church has to be a place where people have a choice.

Materialism leads not only to atheism, but also to individualism and the denial of any reality beyond the individual. Paradoxically it also leads to a belief in the destruction of leadership and faith in the emergent properties of the crowd. It has to be combatted by a belief in meaning, leadership, teamwork, and mission.

The church is an organization like any other and needs the functional strengths of an organization: A realistic awareness of the environment both internal and external; strong leadership that has clear values and a clear strategy as the basis for a team effort; an adequate budget; a healthy membership; a meeting space and area of activity; a time frame for the activities; an educational process that trains people to participate in the mission; the ability to respond to problems with creative new solutions; the ability to defend the core identity; and the technical resources to accomplish the mission.

The mission of the church is simple, to spread the gospel message. But that message has a great variety of expressions depending on the circumstances. One of the things that has been happening in this very strange world of ours is the creation of niche congregations. The cookie cutter congregations that we were all raised in seem to be transforming into a variety of shapes and sizes. We see not only variety in congregations, but also a variety of parachurch organizations that seek to support the work of the church. There is no formula for the will of God, but at each point we are dependent of the presence of the living God.

Our hope is not in a new formula for church renewal, but our hope is in the Lord God who made heaven and earth, and who can make a way where there is no way.