
The United Church of Canada: Still Setting the Table
Chapel in the Park United Church
June 7, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 2:1-9 and Matthew 25:31-46

Today we celebrate the 101st birthday of the United Church of Canada. Happy Birthday! So here is a question for you. When did the United Church of Canada come into being. And where did that happen? And I just now realized I should not have told you that this was the 101st birthday because that was a massive clue.

Actually, I want to give you two answers to the question.

[image: June 10 gathering at mutual street arena]

If you simply ask google, you will be told that the United Church of Canada came into being on June 10, 1925 at a worship service held at the Mutual Street Arena in Toronto. And that is of course true.

But if you know the history, there is another answer to the question. Because the United Church did not spring to life from a vacuum. The seeds of the United Church were planted decades earlier. And those seeds were planted - not in a packed arena in Toronto, but in small rural churches like this one.

[image: old church in Limerick, Sask]

This particular church is near Limerick, Saskatchewan. But this is just an example. The history is about many many small rural churches in Western Canada.

Back in Canada's pioneering days many immigrants - including my father's family - took up homesteads in the prairies. They grew crops and raised cattle. And because transportation was so difficult, farms had to be located close to towns. Which meant that there were a lot of towns, and most of them quite small. The population in Limerick, Saskatchewan today is 115 people.

Protestant denominations all wanted to have congregations in every single town. But that was clearly impossible. It would be crazy for a town of 115 people to have an Anglican Church, a Lutheran Church, a Methodist Church, and a Presbyterian Church, as well as a Roman Catholic Church and an Orthodox Church. And that list only includes

Christians.

This led to what was called the “Church Union Movement”. A movement among some Canadian Protestant denominations based on the idea that if churches worked together, we would be better resourced to actually do the work of the church. Today that might sound like an obvious idea. But in those days, that was not an automatic assumption. It was really a decision that doing the work of the church was more important than preserving denominational independence. And in those days, denominations are closely tied to countries of origin. The idea of working with “those people” in order to make the church stronger was not a slam-dunk.

The union also happened because some people had a vision of a singular Protestant denomination in Canada - perhaps to compete better against the singular Roman Catholic Church.

All of those very practical ideas led over time to the creation of the United Church of Canada in 1925. That union brought together the Methodist, Congregationalist, and about 2/3 of the Presbyterian congregations in Canada. And other denominations have joined since then.

The Union Spirit was a key driver in the creation of the United Church. That spirit continues today. That spirit that says that doing the work of the church is more important than preserving the identities that we carry from our past. That spirit says that the present is more important than the past. That spirit affirms that church is a verb. That churches need to engage in their own time and place.

When congregations amalgamate - which is part of our own history - we always hope that the amalgamation is not just a survival technique. That instead, the bringing together of people and resources creates a new church that is better able to do the work of the church. The creation of the United Church was like that too - at a denominational level.

The United Church of Canada was created to be an active church. That idea of being an active church is seen in our creeds. Let me show you.

The word “creed” comes from the latin “credo” which means, “I believe”. And ancient creeds are simply that - statements of beliefs. Consider the Apostle’s Creed. It

was based on the “Old Roman Creed” from the 2nd century, but was adapted and reached its current form around the 8th century. But consider the structure of the creed.

[image: apostles creed]

It has 3 paragraphs.

- The first paragraph says, “I believe in God”
- The second paragraph says, “I believe in Jesus ...”.
- The third paragraph says, “I believe in the holy spirit ...”.

The Apostle’s Creed only speaks to what the speaker believes. And only describes belief in God, Jesus, and the spirit.

But what about the Creeds from the United Church? We have created 4 creeds actually. One in 1925, one in 1940, one in 1968, and one in 2006. The one in 1968 was called “A New Creed”, and has been updated twice. In 1980 the Creed was changed to use gender-inclusive language. And in 1994 it was changed to include a statement about environmental stewardship with the addition of the line, “to live with respect in creation.” That is the creed that we use here during worship.

[image: a new creed]

But what I want to highlight right now is the structure of the New Creed. The New Creed contains statements about what we believe. It includes statements about God, Jesus, and the Spirit. But it also includes statements about how we should behave. It includes statements about how we should be. It includes statements about hope. And it declares clearly what is almost the motto of the United Church, that “We are not alone”. The New Creed goes beyond simply what we believe. It includes how we are to be the church. Together. The New Creed includes a call-to-action.

To quote, “We are called to be the Church, to celebrate God’s presence, to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.” That is not only about our beliefs. That is about our identity. And it suggests - in broad strokes - what we are to do as a church.

And this idea of being a church that acts and engages in our society is not just empty words. I wanted to share a story about the United Church engaging in our society.

And I wanted to use a story that most of you have not heard before. I apologize if you have heard this story before.

[image: Archambault institution]

The story starts at the Archambault Penitentiary in Quebec. On July 25, 1982, two inmates tried to leave the facility, killed three guards and then when the inmates could not get out, they killed themselves. A widespread riot ensued. In the process of restoring order, many regulations were broken by prison staff and prisoner abuse and torture occurred. After order was re-established, prisoner abuse considered for some time as a form of retaliation for the death of the guards. The UCC “received an anguished plea from families of prisoners” which was responded to at the General Council in 1982. The moderator visited Archambault Prison twice, on Sept 9 and Sept 30 of 1982, to support the families and to check into allegations of grievances. The Moderator joined the call for a formal enquiry into the situation at Archambault, which was eventually carried out.

The moderator met with penitentiary chaplains and also with the families of prisoners. At one meeting, “One wife left the hall in tears - comforted, grateful ... that a national church body had listened to her plea and responded with an act of compassion.”¹ That’s the church in action.

Our moderator took the words in Matthew “I was in prison, and you visited me” seriously. Our moderator also took the words of the New Creed seriously - to seek justice and resist evil. Accepting the call-to-action embedded in our New Creed. Our creed - and our faith - call us to act, even beyond the walls of the church. This also lives well into the sentiment - usually attributed to Saint Augustine - that

[image: quote below]

“Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not.” It has always been understood within the United Church that we are active participants in our own salvation. Faith leads to action.

Action can take many forms. Engaging with the inmate’s families @ Archambault was pretty direct. Other times, engagement can look very different. In a society that tries to isolate and shun people, providing an open space of welcome is an action in itself.

¹ United Church Observer, November 1982. Pg. 2.

The United Church has been welcoming widely for a long time. That is why I titled this reflection “Still Setting the Table”, because we keep setting out new place settings to welcome others to the table of belonging. We still strive to welcome everyone to our table.

In honour of our 100th anniversary, the United Church imagined this in a new way last year.

[image: DaVinci last supper]

We are likely all familiar with images of the “Last Supper”. Like this one by DaVinci. In DiVinci’s mind, the table of course only included white men.

[image: a place at the table]

But in 2025 the United Church commissioned a new image. It is loosely based on the last supper. But the table is not full of white men. The project is not just an image. It is a project called “A Place at the Table” that includes interactive videos and stories. The figures at the table are called disciples. Notice that nobody at the table is Jesus. And nobody is Judas. They are all disciples. Just as we are.

I would like to share some of the disciple videos with you now. And we can hear in their own words why they care about the United Church. And you can find videos from all of these disciples on the United Church web site at

<https://united-church.ca/a-place-at-the-table>

[disciple videos]

I would also like to share a recent video from our moderator. She reminds us that at our last General Council the United Church made a formal apology to queer people. And she invites us into Pride 2026.

[image: moderator’s 2026 pride video]

[image: still setting the table]

The United Church of Canada has always been a place where faith leads to action. And over time we have become more welcoming to all people. We can all find our home right here. Whatever brought you into the United Church of Canada. We are glad that you are here today.

The United Church has been setting the table for 101 years. Adding place settings

for people who were not there before. Prairie farmers. Prison families. Queer communities. The question for us today right here in Thorncliffe Park - or wherever you live - is who still needs a place set for them? Who are we still learning to welcome? That's not a rhetorical question. That is our birthday assignment. And perhaps the next person who we welcome in our midst is our birthday present.

Happy Birthday!

Amen.