

**Remember, Rejoice, Renew**

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John 17:1, 2, 6, 17–21

June 6, 2010 – UM

85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Church of Canada

This week marks the 85th anniversary of the United Church of Canada. It is a significant anniversary, as will the 90th in five years and the centennial in 2025.

By the grace of God, some of us will still be around then.

The United Church of Canada was Born as a union of Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches, as well as some local union churches in the West.

United Memorial actually came into being before that as a result of the Halifax Explosion, and has the distinction of being one of a handful of ‘united’ churches before the United Church was officially formed.

The union wasn't easy.

There were arguments at every turn.

While some congregations came into Union with an attitude "What took us so long?" and had already practically engaged in united activities such as joint services and building a new manse.

Others found it to be a time of division.

On June 10, 1925, eight thousand people from across Canada gathered in the Mutual St. Arena in Toronto to formally inaugurate the new denomination.

This was Big Liturgy. And it was done well. Archival photos suggest that Arena Gardens was effectively transformed for the Inaugural Service by the use of lush plants, Christian symbols, careful lighting, a good sound system, and a raised platform for improved sight lines.

Movement worked. The planners of the Inaugural Service were smart to see in the throngs of people a central liturgical symbol of the union.

Three streams of delegates from the founding traditions (Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist/Local Union Churches) arrived to converge into one, thus enacting the union they were celebrating.

Hospitality enabled participation. Upon entry, people were handed a beautifully designed 38-page order of service, professionally printed on high quality parchment-like paper, containing the full text of the liturgy, its prayers, hymns, and music.

Everyone knew what was going to happen and when.

Diversity made for inclusivity. Hymns characteristic of the founding traditions were sung: "All people that on earth do dwell" from the Scottish Presbyterian psalm tradition; the Methodist favourite "O for a thousand tongues to sing" by John Wesley; the Congregationalist "O God of Bethel.

There were unifying worship gestures. Something especially noted in the newspapers of the day but not elsewhere was the way communion was served. After distribution of each of the elements (pieces of bread followed by individual cups), the congregation was asked to wait in order that all could partake as one.

On that June day in 1925, 8,000 individuals became powerfully united into one body.

Big Liturgy, like all worship, is well served by sacramental gestures of common union, *ut omnes unim sint*, "that all may be one"

This morning we gather, as thousands of other congregations gather, to worship. We sing hymns of that day of union in 1925 and new ones.

We hear the scripture that is both timeless and universal. God loves us and wants to be one with us. And we re-enact a sacrament which is two thousand years old which reminds of the power and presence of God and of Jesus for us, just as our forebearers did.

But that is as it should be. For we are the people of God, loved by God and called into relationship with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. That is timeless, eternal and everlasting.  
*(Thanks to Rev. David Shearman of Owen Sound for the synopsis of that first service)*

Over the past number of weeks, we have been gathering in small and large groups with our church consultant as we imagine and discern what our ministry and mission is going to be for the next 3-5 years.

We had a very lively gathering yesterday with lots of ideas and positive energy in the room.

And at the end of it, we had 5 things that we are going to focus on:

- Being a vibrant, open, inclusive community of faith that practices extravagant hospitality.
- Develop a presence as a place of historical interest
- Explore efficiencies in building use and design.
- Develop communication paths, both electronic and personal.
- Develop ministry with young families and youth.

How those will be lived out is still to be determined, we are at the beginning of the next stage in our life as a church.

As we celebrate the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Church, we remember our roots, we rejoice in 85 years of being the United Church, and we renew our commitment to live in God's way.

Thanks be to God for that opportunity, amen.

Thanks be to God, amen.