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Delegates debate social action, CUC changes

AS NEW EDITORS reporting on our first CUC conference -- held in Victoria, B.C. from May 15 to 18 -- we weren't sure what to expect. Nichola Martin and I took the leisurely ferry ride from the mainland to Vancouver Island and reviewed the agenda -- workshops, plenaries, singing, worships and social events. Not a lot of free time. Almost four days of events. Could there really be that much to talk about?

We're glad to report that we weren't disappointed! We were warmly welcomed, both by the CUC Board and leaders, and also by almost every individual delegate we talked to. The mood was consistently warm, enthusiastic and constructive. We met some fascinating people and came away impressed by the level of intelligent discussion and the breadth of issues addressed.

Even before the official functions began I boarded a 30-foot Zodiac in downtown Victoria for some whale watching in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Our adventurous dozen got drenched in saltwater spray, but we were rewarded with an hour of relaxed drifting amongst four killer whales as they leisurely dove and surfaced in search of fish.

Nichola spent the same day at a native longhouse, listening to Salish elders describe their history and treatment by the whites who took over their land. "For once," she said, "we had to sit and listen to them, without getting a word in edgewise."

Two themes dominated the main conference proceedings: social action, and the changes facing the CUC over the next few years. There was a lot of informed discussion around globalization and the MAI, led by an articulate committee of activists from the Victoria church. In addition to the issues, the CUC wrestled with how it would integrate this politically controversial work into its practice.

The hottest topic was the prospect of change in the CUC's structure and its relationship to the Unitarian Universalist Association -- the continent-wide body to which we are affiliated. We sensed a strong consensus (but not unanimous) that Canadian Unitarians want the CUC to play a stronger role in serving their congregations' needs.

The conference delegates didn't take any conclusive decision on this issue. Instead, a committee will be studying four options (ranging from status quo to formal independence) over the next two years.

The main address at the Sunday service was "Savouring the Soil," delivered by Phillip Hewett of

Vancouver (now retired as a minister, but still vigorous and active in his late 70s). He combined environmentalism, national identity and native spirituality into a wonderful sermon that's excerpted on [page seven](#) of this issue.

The service finished with a hymn we've sung several times at our own church: *This Is My Song*. The slow, minor piece is about admiring your own country's "blue skies," but recognizing that "other lands have sunlight too," and skies "are everywhere as blue" as yours. It's a good metaphor for the Unitarian approach, and fit the spirit of the conference perfectly.

-- Art Kilgour

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Unitarians help build Guatemala school

IN NOVEMBER 1997, 11 members of the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto were part of a Canadian team of 80 volunteers that built an eight-room school and ran a medical clinic for two weeks in Nenton, Guatemala.

The school will provide a primary education for approximately 200 children in this poor, rural area of western Guatemala. The medical team saw about 1,000 patients, who otherwise could not afford treatment.

This school is very different from the ones our children go to. It's a simple construction of concrete blocks and reinforced cement with a corrugated iron roof and cement floor. Each of the seven classrooms is about 18 by 21 feet and accommodates 30 students -- two to a desk. In addition there is a principal's office and two washrooms. The interior and exterior walls are left untreated.

As simple as it is, this is exactly what the community wanted and prayed for over many years. This school is a local solution to a locally identified need, not something imposed by outsiders.

Next November, a team will return to Guatemala for two weeks to work side by side with local volunteers, helping the community of San Antonio Huista build a similar school for its children. As well, the team will operate a medical clinic to provide basic health care for the residents of the small mountain villages surrounding San Antonio. The Unitarian contingent will include members from South Peel, Toronto First, and perhaps one or two other congregations in Southern Ontario.

This year we will be starting a Unitarian tradition for these projects by donating a library that would give the students and teachers access to Spanish language reference, resource and reading material to complement and strengthen the basic education the school will provide. The library for both schools will be purchased with the \$3,000 raised during the Sunday offertory at this year's CUC meeting.

The projects are sponsored by and under the overall leadership of Missionary Ventures Canada, a non-

denominational Christian organization located in Guelph, Ont.

-- More info: Richard Kirsh, 416-767-5837

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President's Column -- John Hopewell

We're maturing as a Canadian denomination

AS YOU READ the reports on the Annual Meeting in this issue, you will realize that the CUC has entered a very critical stage in its development.

Much of the meeting focussed on the report of the Commission on Services to Canadian Congregations and on social action. Each of these developments is vital to our future, and taken together they indicate our increasing maturity as a Canadian denomination.

The highlight of the business meeting was the presentation by John Slattery, and subsequent feedback from the floor, of the report of the Commission. Speakers provided a wide range of opinions on future options for service delivery, but were unanimous in their praise for the work of the Commission.

There was clearly a sense that we are involved in an historic process which, regardless of the outcome at the Annual Meeting in 2000, will have a major impact on our future. As the Commission moves into its next phase, I urge you to read the report and stay in touch with developments that come to you or your congregation.

There was progress in enhancing the ability of our denomination and its members to take social action. We approved studies on globalization and the environment, developed the relationship between the CUC and Unitarians for Social Justice, and unveiled a new social responsibility handbook.

The Commission will ensure we have a viable infrastructure to support our growing congregations in the future. Developments in social action will help us apply our principles in our wider community as individuals, as congregations, and as a denomination.

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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING REPORT

Social action a hot topic at annual CUC gathering

NO MATTER where you went at the recent CUC conference, you were bound to run into these

three terms: social responsibility, social action and social justice.

It seems that 1998 was the year that Unitarians decided to move social issues to the front burner. The great majority of delegates were in favour of having the CUC speak out on these issues and enerate more activity among members at the congregational level.

This work happened in several places at the same time:

- at plenary sessions (the "business meetings") delegates set up two working groups to develop CUC policies in the broad areas of environmentalism and economic globalization
- in workshops, the delegates discussed both social action *issues* (globalization, poverty, ethic investing), and how to go about integrating them into congregational work
- the CUC unveiled a new handbook, *Finding Common Voice*, which gives practical advice for and concrete examples of Unitarian social responsibility work (each congregation receives one copy for free)
- at off-site events, delegates listened to native leaders at a traditional Salish longhouse, travelled by boat to watch killer whales and visited Victoria's renowned Butchart Gardens

Keynote speaker Fil Fraser, a Unitarian who is the head of Vision TV, described three great spiritual traditions world-wide: those that look inward, through meditation and deprivation; those that work primarily in the service of others, like Mother Teresa; and those that involve social action, to improve the world we live in. "I always think of Unitarians as 'third way' people," he said.

The difficulty with getting involved in social action, however, is the potential for controversial issues to divide church members from each other. The upside is that social action can energize a church, involve new people, and create a visibility in the wider community.

These dilemmas were debated at one of the workshops. Some people argued in favour of a well-defined process for social action:

- survey members about their passions and interests
- make sure individuals have a clear mandate to speak on behalf of the congregation
- don't tackle too many issues or campaigns at once

Others felt that social activists should "take the lead," and others will eventually follow, even if it takes some time. "If you have to go through a long internal process," said Joop Schuyff of Victoria, "you'll take the fire out of it."

Frances Deverell of Coquitlam and author of the CUC's new social responsibility handbook said that if churches, "do their organizational groundwork, you'll be better prepared to speak out quickly. Let your social responsibility committee manage the process," she argued, "and let the people with the heat manage the issues."

Kim Turner of Halifax concluded that social action often generates controversy, and church members need to work together in a spirit of respect. "People who are process-oriented don't want to be called 'anti-social action' and people who are issue-oriented don't want to be called 'anti-democratic'."

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Delegates want stronger role for CUC

CANADIAN congregations would like to see their services delivered by Canadian staff, and in terms that are relevant to our country. At least that's what delegates seemed to be saying at the recent CUC conference.

"The most important denominational decisions we ever make will be over the next two years," said John Slattery, chair of the Commission on Services to Canadian Congregations. His group's report to the conference framed the debate that followed.

The Commission was struck last year to investigate the way Canadian congregations are served by the various levels of our religious denomination:

- by the CUC, based in Toronto;
- by the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), based in Boston;
- and by the six UUA districts that run north-south across the border and service Canadian congregations (except for Western Canada, which is an all-Canadian district).

The push for change is coming from dissatisfaction with the current arrangement for transferring funds from the CUC to pay for services provided by the UUA and its districts. In fact, the two organizations agreed earlier this year to cancel the "accord" that governs the payments and work towards a new arrangement.

It sounds like a dry debate, but the issue touches on the historic relationship between Canadian and American UUs. As such, it evoked a lot of passion at the CUC meeting.

Slattery's Commission spent the past year surveying congregations about the services they use, and what they'd like to see in the future. Many of them wanted more Canadian materials, delivered by Canadian staff. So the Commission sketched out four options for restructuring the way services are provided. They ranged from the status quo (most services provided by the UUA and its districts) to complete Canadian autonomy (all funds stay in Canada, all services provided by the CUC through two Canadian districts).

Most of the debate centred on these options, on the issue of Canadian autonomy, and on the process for changing the CUC's relationship with the UUA. In the end, the Commission on Services was mandated to spend another two years investigating the four options, with an interim report next year and a final report in 2000.

Here are some of the opinions that were offered in the debate:

- "The status quo won't likely stay as it is, so we have a decision about change facing us. It makes

me feel anxious, but I realize we have to do it." -- *Brian Keily, Edmonton*

- "I think we'll eventually get to option D [Canadian autonomy], but I don't see that for 25 years; the gradual process will work better." -- *Don Bailey, Winnipeg*
- Kim Turner of Halifax reported on the discussions between the CUC and UUA Boards: "While there are prickly moments, there's good feeling on both sides, and no one should be feeling there's a war brewing."
- Genevieve Laloux Jain of Fredericton wondered whether under the Canadian autonomy option, "differences between rich and poor, east and west" would mean different levels of service for different regions. Elizabeth Aitchison of Vancouver asked if the Commission had considered the idea of three Canadian regions (central, east and west).
- John Slattery replied: "There are any number of possibilities. But the more districts you create, the more expensive it is. We knew that one Canadian district was not realistic for a country this size. We thought two might be feasible."

In the end, delegates thanked Slattery and his Commission for all their hard work. For his part, Slattery promised to maintain the high level of congregational contact established by the Commission in its first year of work.

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Unitarians encounter native issues first-hand

IT FELT LIKE stepping into another era. A giant fire was roaring in the centre of the longhouse, which we needed because it was cold inside. The roof was open to the sky to let the smoke find its way out. I imagined the pain and suffering wending its way up and out with the smoke as facilitator Greg Sam explained that the longhouse has enabled Indian people to survive.

"In the past, white has always been right and everyone always knows what's good for us. That thinking has got to change," said Chief Andy Thomas, hereditary chief of the Esquimalt Nation.

The crowd was made up of mostly white, middle-class church members -- many Unitarians, plus some Catholic and United. We had no idea how the day would unfold. I'm not sure that even our facilitator knew. We were a crowd of educated people who were used to talking and giving our opinions. As the day unfolded it became obvious that we wouldn't be given the chance to offer our well-meaning thoughts.

The native messages were powerful, and in the context of the longhouse they reverberated. Chief Andy Thomas said: "You have to widen your vision to accept us for who we are, and that we have traditional ways of looking after ourselves. Your vision may already be wide enough -- it's up to you to widen the vision of the others out there who don't have such wide vision."

(We were jolted into the 20th century at one point by the ring of a cell phone -- one of the native elders had to take a call!)

We heard about how the elders are trying to reverse the trend of alcoholism and high suicide rates by helping the youth rediscover and understand their culture and traditions. We heard testimonies about beatings in the residential schools and how finding faith has helped.

Robert George spoke about land claims in B.C.: "The creator gave us laws about how to act on land and how to interact with other tribal groups. We were given songs and instructions on how to use it; that's why we are protective of the land."

They are looking for help from groups like ours to pass on our understanding about what an honourable land claims settlement would look like. Young natives are growing impatient as they see a whole generation growing old at the negotiating table.

Finally, Samuel Sam took us through a healing process with burning sage and an eagle feather.

"Knowing" native issues by reading a magazine or newspaper article is one thing. But hearing about them first hand in the longhouse will have a lasting impact on all of us who were there.

-- *Nichola Martin*

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Young adult participation is growing

OLDER FACES and voices outnumber younger ones by a huge margin at a CUC conference. However, this is changing -- probably because of a new fund established to help pay their registration fees. Two years ago there was one young adult delegate; this year there were 10.

Peter Boullata, 30, of Toronto said that "when someone walks into a church and sees no one like themselves, that's the biggest turn off." Wendy Luella Perkins, 32, is an intern minister in Winnipeg. She observed that, "it's hard to get inside" when the church is run by older people. Yet she thinks that her presence in the pulpit once a month "helps younger people identify" with her church. Linda Fedryk-Haroi of Toronto said, "it's not just an age thing, it's also the relevance of the issues."

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International Unitarians visit Victoria

DID YOU KNOW that there are Unitarian and Universalist bodies all around the world? At the CUC annual meeting Jill McAllister of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU) described the various member groups in Europe, Pakistan, India, Romania, and Hungary. The ICUU meets every two years and has been formed to help the budding groups grow and use existing resources.

Two international guests also attended the CUC meeting: Dr. Lillian Burlando of Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, and Celia Midgely, minister of Dunham Road Unitarian Chapel, Althingam and Queens Road Unitarian Free Church, Urmston, U.K.

Dr. Burlando leads the services for a small fellowship of eight to ten people. The group meets about once a month and on holidays. She has become involved with the ICUU and keeps her annual leave to keep in touch with Unitarians in the U.S., Great Britain, and Canada.

Celia Midgely came to Victoria representing the British UU General Assembly. Her visit coincided with the beginning of her sabbatical. In September she plans to go to Prague under the ICUU's minister-on-loan program.

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Amazing facts about killer whales

The hardy Unitarians who braved the open seas in a rubber-hulled Zodiac learned some amazing things about killer whales from Kerry Irish of Seacoast Expeditions:

- killer whales live in matrilineal pods of up to 60 animals, led by the eldest female, and are present in all the temperate oceans of the world
- three pods are permanently resident in the waters around Vancouver Island, feeding exclusively on fish
- the pods fulfil a social need only, because these "resident" whales do all their hunting individually
- "transient" killer whales sometimes pass through the area, feeding on other mammals like sea lions, as well as fish
- the transients do not mate with the resident whales, and some biologists believe the resident whales are becoming a separate species
- killer whales "doze" at night, swimming slowly on the surface, but they do not sleep
- scientists keep careful track of all the resident whales, and can identify individuals by the markings on their dorsal fins
- our group spotted "J-18", a teenaged male of "J" pod
- no one knows why killer whales breach (jump), but since they're at the top of the food chain they can afford to waste energy like this when they're feeling frisky

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Across the country

CUC HAS A BABY BOY

CUC Administrator **Carol Dahlquist** gave birth to an eight-pound baby boy on May 5: Hunter Arthur Dahlquist Currie. So which is harder: having a baby or organizing a national conference for almost 300 delegates? Carol says it's a close call, but that having a baby is definitely tougher.

CHERYL JACK, WAYNE WALDER ORDAINED

Don Heights Unitarian Congregation of Scarborough affirmed **Cheryl Jack's** vocation in ministry on Mar. 29, 1998. Cheryl graduated from the Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago with a Master of Divinity last year. Don Heights is Cheryl's "home" church, where she first attended as a Unitarian in 1983. She now serves as minister to the UU Congregation of Durham, Ontario.

Wayne Walder was ordained by the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto on Mar. 22, 1998. He's a graduate of Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto and now serves as the organizing minister for the Neighbourhood Church, an emerging group in the Beach district.

UNITARIANS HAVE TROUBLE VISITING CANADA

Two recent requests for visitors' visas to Canada by Partner Church ministers in Transylvania were recently turned down by the Canadian Embassy in Bucharest. This has meant disappointment and embarrassment for the Canadian Unitarian congregations who invited their Partner ministers to visit them. Appeals to the embassy in Bucharest have failed, however, CUC Executive Director Ellen Campbell is trying to resolve the situation by working through the Ministry of Immigration in Ottawa.

AIDS CHAPLAIN FOR NOVA SCOTIA

AIDSLink, an interfaith Nova Scotia organization, has been raising the money to hire a chaplain who will provide pastoral care for people with HIV or AIDS. With help from a \$5,000 UU Social Responsibility grant they've almost reached their goal. The chaplain will begin work this September. Three members of the UU Church of Halifax are on the AIDSLink steering committee.

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Executive Director

-- Ellen Campbell

SHARING THE FAITH, INSIDE PRISON WALLS

REV. BARBARA KULCHER has spent the last 15 years in community ministry as a Unitarian chaplain, most recently at the Don Jail. She recently organized a forum for Toronto members of the International Association for Religious Freedom on the topic of "Faith in Prison."

It was excellent. Imam Michael Taylor was the first Muslim volunteer at the Don Jail and has worked to ensure that Muslims can practice their religion in prison.

Hugh Kirkegaard works with the Mennonites to organize "Circles of Support," groups of people who work on a daily basis with discharged prisoners, mostly sex offenders, to provide support and to demand accountability from these most despised and at risk individuals.

Bruce Taylor told us that he first went to prison at nine years of age, and was in and out of jail until he was 30. He now works with ex-offenders, mostly addicts.

These people are not under any illusions, either about the people they work with or the prison system. Their work is often thankless and not valued by the larger society; "success" is hard to define, harder to measure, and rare. Government cuts to supportive programs in prison find little organized resistance, although there is support to build new, larger jails to warehouse people.

We have a history of work in the criminal justice system. Women at the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto organized the first Canadian Elizabeth Fry Society and supported it as volunteers and donors. Frank Lewis persuaded John Howard Societies across Canada to oppose the re-introduction of capital punishment, and in 1976 coordinated the campaign that defeated it.

Barbara Kulcher has lived her Unitarian faith in the context of work in prisons and mental hospitals. Others have been involved as chaplains, volunteers, and advocates.

And now? Will we be there if capital punishment comes up again? Are there knowledgeable voices to speak on young offenders? Are we paying attention to issues of religious freedom within prisons? These unpopular causes still need us.

* * * *

This issue is full of news and information from our Annual Meeting. It was a wonderful get-together. The Victoria Steering Committee -- Janet Evans, Debra Faulk and Elizabeth McGugan -- as well as Norma Elrod, provided a year of leadership and planning. Countless volunteers from the local congregations made people feel welcome, provided information, registered, counted, carried things, etc.

I speak for the Board of Trustees and our staff when I thank all of you who volunteered in any way to make this meeting such a rousing success.

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EXPLORING OUR FAITH -- *Dr. Phillip Hewett* **Savouring the soil helps our spirit grow**

THERE IS A RITUAL we celebrate annually at the CUC meetings. It centres on this pot of soil that travels with us from coast to coast and is added to from a local source each year. It adds a depth of

meaning to our proceedings; if it didn't, we would soon forget it. It symbolizes our unity in diversity and our roots in many soils across this vast land.

In a sermon delivered in Montreal in 1860, the Canadian Unitarian pioneer John Corder said, "Undoubtedly a nation is growing up here in Canada which promises to hold no mean place in the future annals of civilization. Our nationality, as it grows, must savour of the soil on which it grows."

Ever since I first read that sermon, the phrase "savour of the soil" has kept resonating in my mind. Perhaps as you hear it now it doesn't seem to be saying anything out of the ordinary, but Corder was far in advance of his times. For most people in those days, what was said from the pulpit savoured of past ages and distant places. Worthwhile ideas and practices, whether in politics or religion, did not savour of the local soil; they were *imported* from places far away where the real thinking was going on.

Our Partner Church program has brought many of us into much closer contact with the Unitarians of Transylvania. As we get to know them, we also come to realize how different they are from us, not only in their way of life but also in their way of thinking. Some have interpreted that difference as simply a time lag: the Transylvanians are where we were a century ago, and they need to catch up to where we are now. This is insufferably patronizing. Transylvanian Unitarianism isn't a 19th century thing; it's the present day authentic product of the religious wrestling of those people with the situation within which they have to live.

All religious thinking and all religious practice are saturated with the influences of the time and place where they take shape, and of the sort of people who shape them. They savour of that soil, and they don't transplant very readily to another.

It was reflections of this kind -- what has come to be called *contextual theology* -- that came to a focus for us Canadian Unitarians ten years ago. Our discussions at our annual meetings built upon local dialogues and brought us to a new point in our thinking about who we really are and why. But I think there were few discernible long-term effects from that process.

It led me to spend my sabbatical the following year in New Zealand, studying contextual theology at St. John's College in Auckland. I learned a good deal from the traditional religion of the Maori people. An elder told me about the ritual that follows the birth of a baby. Its placenta is ceremonially interred within the soil on which the baby has been born, symbolically marking the attachment of the person to the place.

This brings me to propose five basic themes for a Canadian theology -- features that define our identity or mark our soul. The first is that we're products of a northern country. "Mon pays, c'est l'hiver," said Gilles Vigneault, although maybe he'd never been to Victoria! The religious expression of this is what the German theologian Karl Rahner called a "wintry spirituality" -- one that understands life best "in terms of its struggles, its cold time, its ending in death."

The second theme arises out of pluralism and multiculturalism. John Porter wrote years ago about the doctrine of "unity through diversity" as a Canadian ideology, which he called a mosaic. Each piece has a right to its own identity, but together they add up to an overall design or pattern. This is an idea we

can contribute to the world.

Theme number three: we live on the margin of an empire, our U.S. neighbour. We have to ask what we are making of that religiously. The fourth theme was suggested by Margaret Laurence, who was once part of my own congregation. She noted that few of us have roots in this country that go back for many generations, but that there are people who have -- the Aboriginal people. Just as we can adopt children, so we can, if we work at it, earn the right to adopt ancestors and become part of their tradition.

The last theme is our land itself, ravaged by our greed and stupidity, but still there to support us if we will let it. I'll let the poet Gwendolyn MacEwen speak for me here:

*This land like a mirror turns you inward
And you become a forest in a furtive lake;
The dark pines of your mind reach downward,
You dream in the green of your time
... the dark pines of your mind dip deeper
And you are sinking, sinking, sleeper
In an elementary world;
There is something down there and you want it told.*

There are themes here for us as we seek to make our own proper contribution to the coming new millennium. We will do well to tackle them seriously. The cherishing of a guarded spot does not war against the spirit of inclusiveness that embraces all children of the earth. It simply gives that spirit somewhere to grow.

-- Dr. Phillip Hewett delivered this sermon to 500 Unitarians at the CUC annual meeting

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