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Towards a National Indigenous Organization  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
January 28, 2024  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on ... nothing in the Bible, because the Bible endorses the colonization of indigenous people and I do not.

This year, the United Church of Canada will turn 99 years old. And today, we have to discuss something about the church. The church today. Or perhaps, we we will end up discussing the church of tomorrow. I don't know yet.

But in order for this story to make much sense, I need to begin by reminding (or telling) you how the United Church of Canada is actually organized. And I want to tell this part of the story in a way that is invitational rather than comprehensive. In other words, I will try my best to not put you to sleep. Many details I could have added are not included. You're welcome.

The United Church of Canada is a largely grass-roots organization. So let's begin there. The foundation of the United Church are the congregations. There are other forms of ministries like camps, chaplaincies, and community ministries but the backbone of the church is the congregations. There are approximately 2,600 congregations within the UCC today.

These congregations are grouped geographically into "Regional Councils". These regional councils provide oversight and administration, among other things. There are currently 16 Regional Councils. We are in the Regional Council called "Shining Waters Regional Council". Shining Waters includes the Toronto area, Brampton, and extends north including Barrie, Orillia, Midland, Parry Sound, and Huntsville. Our congregation has two representatives on the regional council: Bill Scott, and myself.

The national layer is called "General Council". It is also called the "National Church", "head office" and likely other names. They are the decision-making body for the UCC as a whole.

Now, most people understand this as a 3-tier hierarchy for administration. But in fact, there is one more layer. Because the UCC is a Christian denomination, but it is also

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a legal entity in Canada.

People sometimes say that Jesus started the church, and I won't argue that point now. But the UCC was created by an act of the Canadian Parliament in 1925. Which means that - among other things - we operate as a legal entity with actual rules. This legal layer is often completely invisible at the level of the congregation. At least until a congregation breaks then rules and then we learn all them.

The legal side of the church is manifest in "The Manual". The manual is a document that describes the legal requirements all parts of the church must follow. Incidentally, I have not owned a hardcopy version of the manual for many years, but the printed copy is about this size. [wave the book] One job that all ministers have by default is to advise their congregations on matters that have legal implications. This happens at every level. When I was in ministry in Brantford I was part of Horseshoe Falls Regional Council. And at regional meetings I was tasked with being the Parliamentarian at those meetings - meaning that I had to monitor the process of the business meetings and alert the assembly to any process or decisions that would be in violation of the rules.

But here's where it gets interesting. The Manual is a two-way street. Because we always have to respect the Manual when we do church business. But at the same time, the Manual includes processes that can be used to make changes to the Manual. So as the church grows and evolves, the Manual can be changed to fit our current needs.

One tool for making changes to the Manual are "remits". There are 3 categories of remits.

- Category 1 remits are used for minor wording or editorial changes. This could include replacing outdated terms, reorganizing text, or changing the gender of language used.
- Category 2 remits are used for changes that are significant, but not "denomination-shaping". This could include changes to processes or procedures, or changing requirements around specific policies.
- Category 3 remits are used for substantive changes that affect the identity of the denomination. This could include changes to the structure of the church, or redefining the church's understanding of ministry. It would also include changes

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to our articles of faith.

I'm sharing this today because we have a Category 3 remit that is before the church right now. This is something that our board voted yes to this week. But the board (and I) think it is important that we all understand what goes on within the larger church, which is why I am preaching to the topic today.

Oh - and one more fact. In case you are not aware. Because ever since the beginning of the United Church in 1925 we have had indigenous elements within the church. That includes Indigenous congregations and Indigenous training centres, among other things. The Indigenous church is sometimes invisible to us, but they have been with us all along. The Indigenous church is not a new thing.

So now with all that background, I invite you to wake up. Because now we will discuss the actual remit that is before the church, and why we might care about it.

A remit is simply a motion. Here is the motion:

“There is one question to be voted on, as follows. Does the regional council/pastoral charge agree to amend the Basis of Union to reflect:

- a) That the United Church of Canada will be organized as follows: (1) a three-council structure, consisting of communities of faith, regional councils and a Denominational Council\*; and (2) an autonomous National Indigenous Organization; and
- b) That once the new autonomous National Indigenous Organization is established within The United Church of Canada, it will have its own mechanisms to make any future changes to its structure and processes, and, therefore will not be subject to the remit process under section 7.4.1 of the Basis of Union\*\*; and
- c) The changes required for the establishment of the autonomous National Indigenous Organization.”

What does that really mean? It simply means that the Indigenous part of the United Church wants the right to structure itself in any way that it chooses. The motion is only about who determines the structure of the indigenous church. And the remit - if approved

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- would allow the Indigenous church to determine its own structure. As it currently stands, the entire church determines the structure of the Indigenous Church through the remit process. The Indigenous church is much smaller than the non-Indigenous church. So having the non-indigenous church voting on remits about the structure of the Indigenous church seems like a waste of effort at best, and at worst, can be seen as a form of ongoing colonization.

So here it is in brief. In 2019, the national church (at General Council 43) approved the creation of a National Indigenous Organization as a body having the same powers and responsibilities as a regional council. And now, in 2024, that existing National Indigenous Organization wants to be granted the right to determine its own structure and to be structurally autonomous within the United Church.

This request is completely consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as the Calls to the Church from the Indigenous Circle.

And I feel compelled to say this. This motion is not really the motion we want to see. For one thing, the motion says nothing about any financial obligations that might come with a “yes” to the remit. The remit is only about structure, not funding. But I know many people who are concerned that this will have financial implications down the road. And frankly, we do not know. In part because it will depend on what sort of structure the Indigenous church decides to use. But I suspect that supporting this remit will not mean more funding to the indigenous church, but instead perhaps a redistribution in how their current funding is allocated.

The remit - as presented - sounds like it would be a gift to the Indigenous church. And it certainly would be because they are asking for it. But the remit would also be a gift to ... us. As Canadians, we all have to deal with our own response to the history of Canada, including European colonization, residential schools, and the 60’s scoop. And we will discuss all of those topics over time. But I feel that this remit would be a gift to us.

What do we think of the fact there is an Indigenous church within the United Church? What do we think of Indigenous people at all? It’s a tough question, particularly here in the Thorncliffe Park community. Many people here are immigrants and have no

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direct connection to the European colonization of North America. And here in Toronto we celebrate a vast number of cultures. How often do we even consider Indigenous cultures? Often, Indigenous people are simply ignored if we do not see them on our own streets.

We even saw this played out on the world stage this week. For decades, Israel has lied and simply declared that Palestinians are not a people. But of course Palestinians are the Indigenous people of Palestine. Does our government support the Indigenous people of Palestine? Or does our government support the European settlers who are currently trying to steal the land from Palestinians? To date, our government has been supporting the colonizers, not the indigenous people.

As Canadians, our relationship with Indigenous people is ... complicated. Supporting this remit is one small step along the path to ending the legacy of colonization and allowing the self-determination of Indigenous people in Canada - at least within the UCC. The remit is a very small step perhaps. But it is a step in the right direction.

Jesus said that he came so that we might have peace, and have it abundantly. Often, we find peace when we give up our need to control other people. In this remit, we are being given an offer from the Indigenous church to stop feeling like we need to control them. Besides, the alternative (which is the status quo) means that we would be voting on remits all the time that only affect the structure of the indigenous church.

Moreover, I like it when the church talks about our identity - who are we? Who do we want to be in 2024 and beyond. Those are great conversations to have. I personally do not get very excited about questions of structure. Perhaps we can just trust the spirit and let the Indigenous church do it's own work. I look forward to seeing what they come up with.

I just want to close with a personal story. Because part of my own story is tied up in this remit.

When I was in ministry in Toronto previously, I was very active in the church structure. I was the chair of the Property and Environment Commission of South West Presbytery. I was a member of the Co-ordinating Council of South West Presbytery. I was an Interim Commissioner for Region 10. And I was a member of the Shining Waters Regional Council Executive.

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In the “old days” when we had Presbyteries and Conferences, the Indigenous church had a home. Indigenous churches were allowed to be members of the Presbytery and the Conference where they were geographically located. They were also able to be part of a special Conference that was not geographically-based. Indigenous churches could (optionally) belong to an Indigenous Conference called ... All Nations Circle Conference.

So when Presbyteries and Conferences were replaced by Regional Councils, it was not obvious where the Indigenous church would find it’s new home. And since I was an interim commissioner for Region 10, I was involved in some of those conversations with members of the Indigenous church. That was very interesting work.

One concern from members of the Indigenous church was that they did not know how they wanted to fit into the new structure. I was one of those people positioned to provide a very pastoral response to that yearning. I said - over and over - that there was no rush and that when the Indigenous church determined how they wanted to be in relationship with the rest of the church, that we would be there with open arms and open hearts to be in relationship with them.

Another concern that I remember being expressed by some was that perhaps the transition to Regional Councils could be delayed until the Indigenous church determined how they wanted to be in relationship with the new structure. I was able - again in a very pastoral way - to affirm that I would love to delay the formation of the Regional Councils until we could all travel that road together. It would have been very cool to have the Indigenous church structure created in concert with the non-Indigenous church structure on day 1. But I was forced to point out that Conferences and Presbyteries were going to disappear on a certain date. And Conferences and Presbyteries - among other things - held assets and liabilities. And those assets and liabilities had to be held by someone. That was a legal obligation. And so Regional Councils had to come into existence on a specific date in order to keep holding those assets and liabilities. There was because of the legal dimension to the church. The alternative would have been to give those assets to national, and that was unthinkable. But again I was positioned and able to re-iterate that the Regional Councils will be there with open arms and open hearts whenever the

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Indigenous church decides how they want to be in relationship.

I was so blessed to be part of those conversations about how the Indigenous church could be in relationship with the non-Indigenous church.

So fast forward to today and we have a remit. To be honest, the remit does not really answer the question of how the Indigenous church wants to be in relationship. But I think that this remit is a single step in a direction that will - over time - lead to new and renewed relationships with the Indigenous church.

We might be frustrated that the remit does not lay out what the new relationship will look like. That is in part because the Indigenous church is not a single thing. It is a number of Indigenous churches that do not agree on everything themselves. I for one am very content to be patient as they work this out for themselves. And I trust that my promise will hold. That when the Indigenous church decides how it wants to be in relationship, that we will be ready with open arms and open hearts. This remit is a single step towards that objective.

I hope that over coffee time today - and during the week ahead - we will share our own ideas of how we imagine our future church, and how we ourselves hope to be in relationship with the Indigenous church.

*Amen.*