

Not *DIRECT* us

The process outlined above as to how the church decides matters of faith and morals including what it should say publicly is too imperfect in theory and practice to warrant our uncritical acceptance of the results. All of us in the church are forgiven sinners not perfect saints and are prone to shape our decisions at times less by sitting under the Word than by attempting to use it to justify the interests of our group or cause. There is also the perennial problem of limited knowledge. The church has been tragically mistaken and unfaithful in the past and must always be reforming.

Yes, *GUIDE* us

The limitations of our collective judgments (cited above) apply also to our personal ones. As we seek to discern God's will and purpose amid the complex social issues of our time, we need to take carefully into account, therefore, the deliberations and wisdom (however limited) of the wider body of the church seeking the same discernment. Why do they see things the way they do? Is it in accord with scripture as best I can prayerfully understand it? Is it in harmony with the longer tested historical wisdom and teachings of our church and the world-wide church? In sum, the church's public stands deserve our serious consideration for they are an important source of guidance, a possible corrective to our own biases and limited knowledge, but not the final authority for discerning what God would have us do.

Thank God, we are finally saved by God's mercy in Jesus Christ and not by our actions or achievements either as individuals or church. But of course, that is why in thanksgiving and joy we try our best to be faithful.

The Church & the Public Realm

Continuing the Conversation
in light of
Questions about
United Church Involvement
in the Referendum on Treaty Negotiations

Since the recommendations from BC Conference about how people might deal with the ballots they received in the Referendum on Treaty Negotiations a number of questions have been directed both to the Conference and the First Nations Committee through which the recommendation came.

These questions are important.

In an effort both to respond to the questions and to continue the discussion the First Nations Committee asked Rev. Dr. Terry Anderson, Professor Emeritus of Christian Social Ethics at the Vancouver School of Theology, to prepare some responses.

Reviewing a listing of some typical questions or concerns pastors and other church leaders receive, Terry has clustered similar questions together. He then formulates a Summary Question that attempts to capture the essence of the general cluster. A response follows each summary question.

As pastors and other church leaders are well aware, often basic questions have huge implications and are difficult to answer in a general way. Terry has been helpful in helping us clarify the conditions and situations under which certain responses might be appropriate.

ecumenical partners; appropriate experts including those knowledgeable about the Church's broad policy direction over the years; and often members of their own congregation.

LESS DIRECTLY

Consultants: The various staff, volunteer committees and others cited above whom the leaders typically consult.

INDIRECTLY

Members of Congregations

They help decide what the church should publicly address and what it should say by

* *Electing members to Boards, Presbyteries, etc.* Do we look for persons who will be knowledgeable and wise in the Word and Way of Christ and able in discerning God's guidance?

* *Groups studying scripture and tradition* and in the light of that examining and acting on various social issues that beset our society. These provide a pool for elected delegates and consultants.

* *Helping to shape through worship, study, congregational practices the ethos or "culture" of our denomination* and hence indirectly and in the long term how we approach and what we say on social issues.

CLUSTER 5

* *Why should we trust the church's social judgments since it has been so wrong before, for example, in regard to the Indian residential schools?*

* *Are we as members supposed to agree with and follow the positions of our church on social and moral issues?*

Summary question

Should the Church's public statements on social issues direct or guide its members' view and actions?

Note that as in the case of preachers, the responsibility of those called to be leaders is not to reflect the majority opinion of United Church members, but to rightly discern God's word for our time. This is the standard by which we should assess the pronouncements of any church leader or church court. We should ask, then, of any particular public pronouncement, is it faithful to the Word of God as we can best discern such, rather than, does it reflect my interests or the views of the constituency (UCC members)? The calling is a very demanding one, and those who undertake it on our behalf need our prayers and any wisdom we might have to offer.

CLUSTER 4

- * *What is the process by which the position of the church was developed? Who was involved?*
- * *Why don't we develop consensus around the position that the church should take?*

Summary question

Who decides what the Church should say?

MOST DIRECTLY

Members (Lay and Clergy) Elected to the church courts and leadership positions. Broad policy directions on important on-going social matters like the relationship between Aboriginal Peoples and the rest of us are proposed, debated, hammered out over the years in the various church courts.

Duly Chosen Leaders (such as the Moderator and Presidents of Conference) must make decisions both as to what issues to address and what is the Word to be given on behalf of the church especially on immediate matters that come to the fore when the courts are not meeting. They will typically seek the counsel of staff including some of whom have been hired to deal with the social witness of the church; any volunteer committees who are engaged with the matter at hand; Church members and personnel who are directly involved with the issue and people entailed:

CLUSTER 1

- * *The church should remain the spiritual home for people, not the political arm.*
- * *Involvement in the political process is distasteful.*

Summary question

Are political/social issues part of the church's proper "business"?

YES if this means Christians as individuals or informal groups (the Church dispersed) and/or as an organized institution (the Church gathered) should attend to the way in which we organize and govern our collective life (the political realm) and the way we produce, distribute and consume goods and services (the economic realm). The gospel of Jesus Christ entails a spirituality in which right relationship with God is inextricably bound up with right relationships with other humans and the rest of creation. The Church as Christ's disciples is called to proclaim the good news of God's love and the promise of the Kingdom in Christ and to show forth the first fruits of this by their love of God and neighbour in every area of life.

NO if this means that as a formal institution the Church should control or attempt to control the state. The church has discovered through bitter experience that it cannot be faithful to love of God and neighbour if it does this.

USUALLY NO (there are rare, special exceptions) if this means the Church officially sanctioning one particular political party, organization, or strategy for achieving a good end. All such are almost always an amalgam of conflicting interests and all too fragile judgments. They are too imperfect morally by the standards of God's Way and too doubtful regarding their effectiveness in accomplishing desired ends to warrant the Church's official imprimatur or sanction in the name of Christ. Equally faithful Christians can legitimately differ about them.

CLUSTER 2

- * *Are you not inflaming divisions by raising this issue?*
- * *Why should we invite the public into conversation before our church family has had a chance to talk alone? We are misleading the public by inferring there is a consensus around a U.C. position.*

Summary question

Should the Church speak publically on social issues?

YES if this means its members entering the public forum to present and argue for their views shaped by the vision, goals and values of Christian discipleship.

YES, BUT CAREFULLY AND WITH LIMITATIONS if this means the church's top leaders proclaiming the Church's official word on any particular matter. For the reasons cited above, the most appropriate pronouncements (in the prophetic tradition of the Bible) do one or more of the following:

- * *present an alternative vision* (in light of the promised Kingdom of God) of the kind of society we should be seeking especially in those times when a society seems to be losing its way or is going in a destructive direction;
- * *utter a prophetic warning* when certain policies or strategies violate basic standards of justice, human rights, peace, right relations, trusteeship of creation, and the like;
- * on behalf of the needs of those most marginalized forgotten, neglected, or exploited;
- * *commend efforts* (without endorsing particular strategies) to address the needs of the poor and powerless.
- * *Set forth in the public forum some broad social goals* for our time (not a political platform) that advance us toward a society of shalom (right relations between humans, humans and the rest of creation, and between the whole of creation and God)

Such official pronouncements on fundamental matters of a just society will be most appropriate and necessary when few other groups or effective public voices are addressing them.

WARNING: The Church must guard against taking flight from the demanding calling to seek justice and peace in the name of Christ on the one hand, and on the other hand, against the ever present danger of being captured as a sanctioning tool by some particular political ideology or program.

CLUSTER 3

- * *Many drew the conclusion that expressions of the President were the collective opinion of hundreds of thousands of U.C. people. But this is not so!*
- * *Why do you think that you speak for me or my family?*

Summary question

Who speaks for the Church?

The Members

By their daily words and deeds in the place where they live and work members give witness faithfully or not to the message and mission of the church. This voice does not usually attract media attention but probably is the most important and effective.

The Courts of the Church

Congregation boards, presbyteries, conference annual meetings, general council all speak, mainly through resolutions designed for this purpose.

Duly Chosen Leaders

In the case of the UCC, we elect or appoint such leaders – for example, the moderator, the presidents of conference – partly for the work of discerning the Word that should be spoken and witness that should be made in Christ's name both to us in the Church and to the “world” or society including those in power, and those who govern us.