

## **John Webster Grant and His Place in The United Church of Canada**

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The title of my presentation, as it appears listed in the programme, is slightly misleading. I intend to talk about John Webster Grant's contribution to the United Church. I am not examining Grant as a "Church Leader" *per se*, but Grant as an individual who gave very significant leadership within The United Church of Canada. I want to look at five areas, some more briefly than others. I want to begin by acknowledging, albeit very briefly, Grant's role as a teacher. Then I shall examine his role in the production of the red *Hymn Book* that the United and Anglican Church co-published in 1971. Third, I wish to address some aspects of his very significant leadership role in the union talks that attempted to bring together The Anglican Church of Canada, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the United Church. Fourth, I shall give some attention to his scholarly work that focussed upon the history of the United Church. Finally, I shall examine some of his United Church-related writing and speaking after his retirement from Emmanuel College. Grant did some significant reflection in these years, both in addresses and in essays, on what he saw as both the strengths and the weaknesses of the denomination he loved a great deal. In those retirement years he was sought out by some who exercised leadership in the United Church for the wisdom and the insight he could impart.

I begin with a brief biographical comment. John Webster Grant was raised in Pictou County, Nova Scotia, and his roots ran deep in the Presbyterianism that was such a dominant force in Pictou County. Church Union, which occurred when Grant was six years old, may have made many of these congregations United Church in name, but they continued to reflect strongly their Presbyterian heritage. Grant was shaped by that experience in many ways, not least in his attention to the intellectual dimension of Christian life and practice, his carefully reasoned approach to issues within the United Church, and his valuing of the tradition of the wider church.

John Webster Grant contributed to the United Church in many ways. First, he played a significant role as a teacher. When thinking of Grant as a teacher, the tendency is to focus on his twenty-one years (1963-1984) as

the professor of church history at Emmanuel College in Toronto. But he also spent one year at Pine Hill Divinity Hall in Halifax, nine years at Union College in Vancouver, and a year at the United College of South India and Ceylon. In other words, he taught for over thirty years at one or another of the United Church's theological schools. He would have taught about thirty-five per cent of the ministers the United Church ordained during those twenty-one years at Emmanuel. In that sense alone, he had a significant role in shaping the pastoral body of the United Church.

I have talked with some persons who studied under Grant during those years at Emmanuel. Three characteristics stand out for them – first, Grant's deep passion for the United Church; second, his gentle, gracious manner; third, his deep concern for his students, for whom he made time. They also remember an unassuming figure who did not call attention to himself. I suspect that many who studied under him did not realize the extent of his involvement in denominational matters during the 1960s and 1970s.

Hymnody represents a second key area of John Webster Grant's contribution to the United Church. The General Council that met in 1962 appointed Grant to the "Church Worship and Ritual Committee,"<sup>1</sup> but his primary role within the committee was as a member of the sub-committee that began work in 1963 on a revision to the United Church *Hymnary*, the then-existing United Church hymnal that dated back to 1930. The sub-committee charged with producing a new hymn book for the denomination reported to the General Council that met in 1964. In their report it was noted that "The Rev. Dr. John Grant of Emmanuel College has made a thorough study of the hymnody of Chas. Wesley."<sup>2</sup> In terms of the breadth of material he had to cover (Charles Wesley wrote some 6500 hymns), Grant drew the "short straw" on the revision committee. By 1966, in light of the acceptance by both the Anglican Church and the United Church of the "Principles of Union" developed in 1965, the two denominations agreed to publish a joint hymnal. Grant continued his involvement not only as one of the fifteen United Church representatives on the joint Anglican-United Church committee that produced the 1971 *Hymn Book* but also as a writer and translator of hymns. The 1971 *Hymn Book* included four of his translations of medieval Latin hymns. It also contained a hymn he wrote that was based on Psalm 122. Grant, throughout his career, had a concern to emphasize to the United Church its relation to, and its debt to, the wider Christian tradition; his contribution to the *Hymn Book* as a translator and an author reflects that concern. By

way of a tangential note, it speaks to the inevitable changes in time and taste in hymnody that only one of those hymns – his translation of the 9th century Latin hymn, “O Holy Spirit, by Whose Breath” – is included in the current United Church hymnal, *Voices United*, which succeeded the *Hymn Book* in 1995.

Grant’s third contribution to the United Church was his leadership in ecumenical endeavours in general and in the union discussions among the Anglican Church, the United Church, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in particular. When the national governing bodies of the Anglican and United Churches had accepted the “Principles of Union” in 1965 and 1966 respectively – the involvement of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) began when that denomination joined these talks in 1970 – the two denominations then appointed members to a general commission charged with developing a plan upon which the then two denominations could unite. Grant served on that general commission on union from its initial meeting in 1967. More significantly, he chaired its Executive Committee. He was also to chair the committee charged with developing the “Plan of Union.”<sup>3</sup> During this time he became a key spokesperson within the United Church explaining the process toward union.<sup>4</sup>

Grant’s commitment to, and passion for, these tri-denominational union discussions comes through in his own published reflections on the unsuccessful effort to bring the three churches together. In an article published in 1983, he described the culmination of his work as the chair of the committee that drafted the *Plan of Union*.

The final session of the general commission, held in the Queen of Apostles Renewal Centre at Mississauga, Ontario, from 13 to 16 November 1972, stands out as one of the most memorable experiences of my life. It was my responsibility, as chairperson of the drafting committee, to stand before the commission for several days, from early morning until late evening, answering questions and receiving suggestions, and then to meet the committee each night to consider possible revisions. No one could have been more thrilled when at the conclusion, the entire commission, including several prominent members of the House of Bishops, rose to endorse the *Plan of Union* and to sing the customary doxology.<sup>5</sup> While the failure of the three denominations to unite caused Grant much disappointment, it neither embittered him nor reduced his commitment to ecumenism.

Many United Church persons, ministry personnel and lay people,

who did not study with John Webster Grant, have experienced his contribution to the United Church through his fourth area of contribution, namely, his scholarly work on the denomination's history. I would in no sense be alone in that group in saying that I have been shaped in my understanding of my denomination's tradition and its place in the wider Christian tradition by his writing. His analysis of the movement that led to the creation of the United Church, namely his 1967 book, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union*,<sup>6</sup> still stands, in my judgement, as the most cogent book-length analysis of the church union movement that focuses on why and how this event came to happen in such an apparently unlikely place as Canada. Over the years, he published articles and delivered lectures that sought to demonstrate the crucial role late nineteenth-century Protestant liberal evangelicalism played in bringing the United Church into being. In an era when the term "evangelical" has come to have a very different meaning, particularly in popular parlance, Grant wanted contemporary United Church members to see their roots in the pan-Protestant evangelical tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He believed that one could not understand "the founding vision" of The United Church of Canada without an awareness of that tradition. While Grant was unfailingly gracious and generous, he also expressed anxiety about the rather cavalier attitude towards history and tradition he frequently observed in United Church circles, and he sought to counteract it by making the denomination's history known and accessible.

The final area upon which I want to touch is his writing and addresses in the late 1980s and early 1990s,<sup>7</sup> addresses and writings directed to a United Church audience. I have always found it instructive of the regard in which Grant was held that in February 1989, the United Church's Division of Ministry Personnel and Education invited Grant to be their theme speaker at the Division's annual meeting. In light of the tension then existing in the United Church over the decision of the 1988 General Council that sexual orientation, in and of itself, did not constitute a barrier to ordination, the Division's leadership invited Grant to examine "the way our systems and structures, attitudes to scripture, authority, use of power, hierarchy or mutuality in ministry, etc., have affected our decision making."<sup>8</sup> Grant's addresses on that occasion represent, in my view, the best short analysis of the reasons for the tensions that had existed in the denomination for some time. Grant also offered, in his own self-deprecating way, some hints as to where he thought the United Church ought to go if it wished to reduce the unhealthy and divisive aspects of

those tensions.

Four points or themes are dominant in these addresses and in his other writings from this period directed to the United Church. First, in an observation he had already named as a weakness of the United Church when he wrote *The Canadian Experience of Church Union* in 1967, he asserted that the United Church, as a denomination, tended to focus on tasks, or on doing, rather than on giving attention to what it means to be a church. He asserted that as a denomination the United Church needed to become more self-critical, to ask who it was and who it wanted to be.

Second, he observed that a significant shift had taken place in the church's decision-making process. Whereas reason and logic in debate, following a carefully prepared presentation by experts that traced the denomination's past statements on the question, had been the method of bringing matters to church courts (and most especially to the General Council) up until the late 1960s, a change then occurred by which an issue or question was presented and the voting delegates were invited to reflect upon how they felt about the question. In the 1970s and 1980s at least, there was also a corresponding suspicion of expertise. Grant asserted that the United Church needed to achieve a balance between these left brain-right brain approaches to decision-making.

Third, he urged patience in decision-making. The only decisions that count, he averred, are ones the membership accepts. Adequate time for discussion and debate, not only at a meeting of the General Council but also throughout the church, might mean a slower pace for decision-making, but would probably also mean a more receptive and informed constituency.

Finally, he asserted that we needed to find a balance between flexibility and openness on the one hand and tradition, both our own and the wider Christian tradition, on the other. Too exclusive a focus on either would not produce a denomination with staying power. In his later writings from this period he appears to worry even more about what he called "the shortness of our memory" as a denomination.

It is too soon to assess the continuing effect of Grant's contributions to the United Church. That probably will require a panel such as this morning's sitting here twenty years or so from now. That said I shall make two observations. First, about a dozen years ago two of my faculty colleagues, then approaching retirement, commented to me that "your generation of teachers" in the UCC schools were more denominationally identified and paid more attention to "the tradition of the United Church"

than they had done. I do wonder whether Grant's emphasis on the need for denominational members and leaders to reflect more upon the tradition has been a factor for those of us who began teaching from the mid-1980s onward in United Church related theological schools. Second, when I teach a course in the history of the United Church, as I do from time to time, I have students read extensively from primary sources. But in the secondary sources I use, writings by John Webster Grant predominate. His works predominate because he offers those within the denomination some crucial insights into who we are and some thoughtful suggestions on how to approach our future. John Webster Grant contributed to the world of Canadian scholarship in so many ways, as the comments of other panellists today have made clear. He also contributed, in many and in diverse ways, to the particular denomination that was his ecclesiastical home.

### ***Endnotes***

1. United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of the Twentieth General Council* (1962) (Toronto: United Church Publishing House 1962), 27.
2. United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of the Twenty-first General Council* (1964) (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1964), 438.
3. John Webster Grant, "Leading a Horse to Water: Reflections on Church Union Conversations in Canada" in ed. Horton Davies *Studies of the Church in History: Essays Honoring Robert S. Paul* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1983), 168.
4. For example, Grant was a member of a panel at a joint session in 1971 of the General Synod and the General Council to consider a first draft of the "Plan of Union." The panellists answered questions and provided background information. See United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of the Twenty-fourth General Council* (1971) (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1971), 46.
5. "Leading a Horse to Water," 171-172.
6. John Webster Grant, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1967). This book was published simultaneously in Great Britain by Lutterworth Press.
7. John Webster Grant, "'They Don't Speak For Me': The United Church's Crisis of Confidence," *Touchstone* 6, no. 3 (September, 1988): 9-17; "Roots and Wings," Unpublished Addresses Given at the National Meeting of the

Division of MP&E, February, 1989; "What's Past is Prologue" in *Voices and Visions: 65 Years of The United Church of Canada*, ed, Peter Gordon White (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1990), 124-149; "Unauthoritative Reflections on the United Church's Story," *Touchstone* 12, no. 1 (January 1994): 4-12.

8. Grant, "Roots and Wings," 1.