

What We Believe

In the United Church we recognize that we are on a journey, and there are statements of faith to guide us on our way. We have A Song of Faith (2006), the Basis of Union (1925), the Statement of Faith (1940), and A New Creed (1968). See www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements. We have adapted A Song of Faith for camps, as “Singing a Song of Faith at Camp” (see the spring/summer 2009 camping newsletter at www.united-church.ca/communications/newsletters/camping). We have the whole rich, complicated narrative of the Bible—and we have preachers who talk about the way our lives are illumined by the biblical story. We have beloved old hymns—and we have new ones coming out all the time. What follows is not an in-depth study of the church’s faith and practice (theology), but rather a brief overview of the *ethos*, or distinguishing character and guiding beliefs, of the church.

We believe in the intimate, active presence of God, here and now, with us. We believe that God has not set the universe running like a wind-up toy and gone away. God is always here. In Jesus Christ, God came into the world as servant of all. And we—each of us—receive God’s Spirit. In our encounter with other people, we know God.

We believe God is just as much Mother, as Father (Exodus 19:4, Matthew 23:37). As a result, we encourage the use of expansive language to describe God. It’s all right to use Mother when praying, singing, or talking about God, as well as Father.

We believe that who God is, is not something we can fully define. “God is Holy Mystery, beyond complete knowledge, above perfect description. Yet, in love, the one eternal God seeks relationship.” (A Song of Faith)

We believe the ultimate power of life and death rests with God. In Jesus’ resurrection, God overcomes death. “In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us,” say the words of A New Creed. “We are not alone.”

We celebrate diversity. We are a diverse, intercultural community with congregations and other ministries that serve diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups. We are French, Japanese, Aboriginal, Korean, Black, Chinese, Deaf, and many more cultures, languages, and races.

We believe in welcoming everyone, regardless of age, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or physical ability. We welcome all to the full life of Christian community.

We include in the celebration of marriage couples of any gender, of any (or no) religious or marital background, and of couples who choose not to be married.

We believe anyone can talk to God directly. We pray as a community, and as individuals. Many follow spiritual disciplines at home, like prayer, meditation, or writing down their dreams (or even gardening). We pray for healing—of ourselves, of others, of the world. We believe in God: who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus... who works in us and others by the Spirit.

There is an enormous range in what United Church members believe about the Bible and the way it speaks to us. Although the Bible is an authority for us, we still have to interpret the words, and it’s on how to interpret those words that there are differences of opinion. Interpretation means being open to hearing the text afresh in a way that makes us vulnerable. Through the Bible we hear a message of God by which we are judged and shown mercy and love.

We are challenged to understand words like sin, forgiveness, salvation, obedience. We understand sin, for example, to be a society that allows some children to miss the pizza on pizza days at school because they can’t afford it—or puts Aboriginal Canadians in jail at significantly higher rates than non-Aboriginal Canadians. We see salvation as something to look for in the here-and-now. When we turn outward rather than inward, when we show compassion rather than judgment, when we seek justice, love kindness, and show mercy, we experience God’s grace and forgiveness, and that is salvific—a moment of true grace and peace.

We believe that humans are only one part of the whole creation God loves. We are not the masters, but one of the creatures, with enormous responsibility. Respect for the earth calls us to live out our spiritual values through active engagement, through renewed prayer and new behaviours for the life of creation. Many congregations have implemented policies and practices for energy conservation, transportation, political action, and more. Camps have been way ahead of the environmental movement on issues such as protection of the environment, recycling, sustainability, respect for the earth, and reducing our impact on the environment.

As a denomination the United Church works with many other denominations in coalitions around refugee issues, global development, economic issues, or human rights. In terms of mission, we have learned to regard other faiths with respect, including Indigenous faiths. We consider mission a two-way conversation—one that involves listening as much as talking.

Baptism, the sacrament of belonging, is a sacred moment of acknowledgement by the community, in worship. While in the United Church the usual practice is to baptize infants or small children, people of any age can be baptized.

We celebrate communion, reminding us that God has come to us in Jesus to give us new life. In the words, “Do this in memory of me,” there is a command for us to do as Jesus did—pour out ourselves in compassion for the world, allow ourselves to be transformed and brought closer to the God who loves us.

We believe in a God who freely offers us love, whether we deserve it or not— a love that cuts through whatever evil lies around us. This is called grace. Even when we allow ourselves to be separated from one another, God’s grace can break through—a depression lifts, however briefly, a friend arrives with a hug, an apple tree bursts into bloom. In the face of a family’s grief, or a child’s fear, theological explanations are out of place. At that point, God’s grace is all there is—the hope that those who suffer or die in pain are never alone. As our confession of faith says, “We are not alone... God is with us.”