

Sharing from General Council

"The Church's One Foundation, is Jesus Christ her Lord", this hymn takes us back to the inaugural service of the United Church, 90 years ago, in 1925 when delegates from the three formational denominations entered the arena and then combined to form one body for the first time. It speaks of Jesus Christ being the one foundation of our church. However, when compared with our scripture for today we see a possibly different message.

Jesus asks his disciples what people are saying about him. They respond that many think Jesus is one of the prophets from the Bible returned to them. Jesus then asks, "who do you say that I am?". The disciple Simon speaks up, "You are the Messiah, the Son of God". In response to this bold declaration of faith Jesus tells him: "from now on you will be called Peter, for on this rock I will build my church."

So according to this story, Jesus does not declare himself to be the foundation of the church but it is through Simon's faith to become Peter, which means "a rock", that the church will be built. If you are familiar with the tradition of our Catholic friends you may already be familiar with this passage. It is the story that forms the theology of the Pope and the apostolic succession. Catholics believe that Jesus was investing authority on one man, Simon, to rule the church.

However, I would like to present another possibility. A possibility that might make sense given our recent General Council. Simon was not an important man at this point in the story, he was probably not even the leader of the disciples. He was just an often stubborn and

perhaps not very successful fisherman from Galilee, from a small town called Kfar Nahum. He was just an ordinary person, like many of us, not significant to his culture or his people, but someone who loved Jesus and saw in Jesus' message something to believe in. He was beginning to see in Jesus: possibilities and perhaps something significant enough to change the world.

General Council was held in Newfoundland this year. It is an island that has come to be known as "the Rock". It is likely called this because of its geologically unique landscape. Newfoundland was once under the ocean and emerged when two continents collided many millions of years ago. This accounts for much of Newfoundland being of exposed rock that once lay deep under the ocean floor in the earth's crust. Newfoundland might be called "the rock" for more than just geological reasons. The people are also tough, hard working and able to survive under extremely harsh conditions, both in climate and economy. Newfoundland, in both land and people is a survivor.

Like Simon, many of Newfoundland's people are fishermen (and women). They are very much like Simon, poor, hardworking and not very important on the global stage. When Jesus declared that Simon would become Peter, the foundation of his church, many others may have been mystified by this decision. Why wouldn't Jesus find someone who has more expertise in organizational system? or perhaps someone who was highly religious, a great prophet or teacher?

When the United Church was formed, it was intentional to place its governance in ordinary people rather than experts. So in this sense, our church's foundation has been people like Simon Peter, people like the folks of Newfoundland. It is Jesus working through the lives of

ordinary people that form the foundation of our church and maybe this is what Jesus had in mind all along.

General Council this year had many important decisions before it that have the potential to greatly transform the United Church. I have decided not to go through them one by one and explain the decisions that were made during this sermon, because in all honesty there is not enough time. (I will be doing a presentation later this month or in September as part of my learning that you all will be invited to and I will ensure to inform the church office to make that announcement when it is time.) I remember sometimes people would say, "why don't we find an expert on this topic to consult with before we make a decision". Then, more often than not someone would get up to respond, "no this is the task that the church has entrusted to us and we have a duty to fulfill this role".

We often feel inadequate to do what God has called us to do. This is why we are not "the rock upon which the church is built" alone. We have Jesus Christ as our foundation and God as our helper. As General Council continued to meet and work out our calling things would start to synchronize. We would worship and pray during particularly intense moments of the discussion. In the end, all the decisions that needed to be made were made, without calling in specialists or holy people, we did it together, as ordinary people called by God to be the Rock on which our church is built.

I am glad that our church is not run by a small group of experts who make our decisions for us. I think my greatest impression from General Council is that we are a passionate people who care deeply about our church and our calling from God.

We are passionate about worship: Each worship service the entire assembly joined together in song and in prayer to keep us centered on God and the reason we were all there.

We are passionate about justice for indigenous people: Involvement and consultation from our first nations was intentional and significant in all areas of General Council. We all realized we still have much to do in areas of reconciliation but both indigenous and non-indigenous feel committed to doing this hard work together. Perhaps the most significant moment in the entire council was when we all joined hands in a circle (a very large double circle) around the arena and sang "Draw the Circle Wide" and then received little pouches of sacred tobacco from the First Nations elders to take back home with us.

We are passionate about caring for creation: Issues of climate justice and caring for creation were paramount at this year's council and some tough decisions were made that did not please everyone. However, the belief that we must not only preach about justice but that we must do justice even if it has very real consequences is our duty as followers of Jesus.

We are passionate about the world: New ground was broken in approving full communion with the United Church of Christ in the USA. Also agreements of mutual recognition of ministry with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines and the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea. We also welcomed ministry partners from around the world in interchurch and interfaith partnerships.

We are passionate about building a future: Tough decisions were made to ensure the church has a bright future where we can continue

to love God and serve all. Referring back to my last sermon here, I am not the only one who believes our church will not only survive but thrive. Almost every moderator nominee preached on the future of our church.

We are passionate about Jesus Christ: Everyone had a sense that as we draw the circle wide we cannot forget our source, the centre of our circle. Jesus is our partner and friend as we live out our being as the foundation of the church.

While I feared that attending General Council this year might have sent me "running for the hills", I am pleased to return to you with an even more secure belief that we are living into what God is calling us to. We are not just a church with a very bright future, but we are a church with a very bright present. All of our members and adherents have amazing gifts they are offering because they believe that together we can make a difference and bring justice and love to all. We have leaders: ordained, diaconal and lay that are passionate about our congregations and ministries. We have a tradition that believes that all can hear God's voice and all can be included in discerning what the church will be.

Many of the motions of General Council will be returning to the presbyteries and congregations for remit. I encourage all of you to ensure that your minister, your council or your presbytery representatives listen to your concerns and prays with you as you all work through these concerns together. Please do not keep silent because you think that you are the only one who disagrees or that you think your voice doesn't matter. We are called to do this work together

and together we must stand United! You are Peter, on upon this rock
Jesus is building this church! Thanks be to God, Amen.

-Craig Perry