

# Who We Are

United Church Theology, Culture, and Traditions



FOR STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS AT UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA CAMPS



The United Church of Canada  
L'Église Unie du Canada

# Introduction

## Message to Staff

Whether or not you are a member of The United Church of Canada, *this booklet is for you—a staff or volunteer at a United Church camp.* This booklet is meant to help you understand who and what you are representing as an employee at a United Church camp.

The *Camping Standards Manual* includes the following standard: “Camp staff at United Church camps have knowledge of and appreciation for United Church theology, culture, and traditions.”



## A New Creed

We are not alone,  
we live in God's world.

We believe in God:  
who has created and is creating,  
who has come in Jesus,  
the Word made flesh,  
to reconcile and make new,  
who works in us and others  
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:  
to celebrate God's presence,  
to live with respect in Creation,  
to love and serve others,  
to seek justice and resist evil,  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,  
God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God

"A New Creed" of The United Church of Canada was developed in 1968 and altered in 1998.

Also available in other languages: French, Spanish, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Lugandan, Swahili, Tagalog, Chinese, Magyar, Kiswahili. See [www.united-church.ca/beliefs/creed](http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/creed).

So you're probably asking yourself, "What exactly are the United Church's theology, culture, and traditions?"

This booklet holds the answers to those questions, in a brief, easy-to-read format, written specifically for you—someone passionate about children and youth, the wonder of God's creation, and the joy of community.



# United Church Camping

For over 85 years, hundreds of thousands of children and youth have been blessed at United Church camps. Over 20,000 campers are welcomed at summer camps each year, and thousands more (of all ages) come for retreats, family camps, conferences, school outings, and much more!

Our camps are unique. There simply are no other camps in existence that provide children, young teens, youth, young adults, adults, families, and seniors with what our camps provide. Our camps are safe, welcoming, fun, creative, inspiring, faith-filled, relationship-based communities. They live out a gospel that

- is based in love—life more abundant and free
- connects us to the mystery of life
- welcomes us into relationship and community
- deepens our awareness of creation, our connection to and responsibility for the environment and the world around us
- states that in all our diversity and uniqueness, we are all valuable children of God

What do campers have to say about United Church camping?

- Camp is home
- Camp = Life
- Camp changed my life
- Camp developed me into who I am today!

Parents have shared that what they love most about camp:

- Dirty laundry from happy kids
- Seeing my children smile non-stop!
- My son cried because he didn't want to leave! "It was the best week of my life!" was his comment when I came to take him home.



**People like you make all of this possible.**

## Did You Know...

- Over 6,000 people dedicate themselves to staff our camps each year (paid and volunteer). This does not include the thousands of volunteers and other church and community members who give of their time and expertise throughout the year to help repair and build facilities, take part in spring clean-ups, participate in fundraising events, and much more.
- Over 4,000 people *volunteer* as staff—over half of them under the age of 18.
- Over 2,000 serve as *paid* staff—again, over half under the age of 18.

# The United Church of Canada

The United Church of Canada is the largest Protestant denomination in Canada. We minister to close to 3 million people in over 3,000 congregations and over 300 additional church ministries. Ours is a rich history closely entwined with the development of Canada itself. Inaugurated in 1925, the Methodist Church, Canada, the Congregational Union of Canada, and 70 percent of the Presbyterian Church in Canada entered into a union. In 1930 the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Bermuda joined, and now functions as a presbytery of the Maritime Conference. For more information on our history, see [www.united-church.ca/history/overview/brief](http://www.united-church.ca/history/overview/brief).



The United Church is made up of congregations, community ministries, campus ministries, seniors' residences, theological schools, education centres, hospitals, financial ministries, housing ministries, global partnerships, social justice work, hospital and military chaplains, and the largest denominationally based camping ministry in Canada, with over 60 camps!

## Community

We are not alone,  
we live in God's world...

We are a community.

We worship, study, pray, talk, eat, share fellowship, celebrate, and serve together. We give from the heart, bringing food to a potluck, serving on a church committee, helping out in the local community, or being active at a United Church camp.

One thing that makes the United Church a unique Christian denomination is the diversity of how we understand our beliefs. Sitting side-by-side in a pew, or scattered across the country, United Church people don't all agree with one another. *We are* united—united in the fact that we agree to disagree, that it's okay to question and be skeptical, that it's okay to not see eye-to-eye on all things. The United Church is a church full of questioners and seekers.

## Worship

We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence...

On Sunday mornings, and at other times during the week, you will find small and large groups of people gathering together in churches, to worship and celebrate God's presence. We are hungry for something: direction, ritual, friendship, tradition, community, singing, prayer, meaning. God. Whether long-time members or newcomers, we have a desire to find meaning and purpose in our lives, to know who Jesus is, to be closer to God, to understand what God is asking of us. We gather in churches, seniors' homes, colleges and universities, retreat/education centres, and surrounded by God's wonderful creation at camps scattered throughout the country. We pray, sing, celebrate, listen, learn, laugh, and share our gifts.

# What We Believe

We believe in God: who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus... who works in us and others by the Spirit.

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](http://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](http://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.

**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.”

## Loving and Serving

We are called...to live with respect in Creation,  
to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil.

The United Church has a long tradition of advocacy for those who are poor or outcast from society. The gospel (or “good news”) is expressed through policies and initiatives in every part of society: gambling, unemployment, Aboriginal land claims, abortion, foreign policy and human rights, gender identity, interculturalism, energy and the environment, food, sexual orientation, same-sex marriage, economic justice, and more.

In an effort to follow Jesus, we serve “the least important” (Matthew 25:31–46) in a variety of ways. Many of our camps have sessions specifically for children from the inner city, with sponsorships available for those who can’t afford to attend. Whatever we do, we do it because we believe God calls us to live as the people of God in the real world.

The United Church doesn’t always agree on how to do justice work. We don’t always agree on what the Bible is saying. In 1988, after lengthy debate, the church decided to include openly homosexual people seeking to become ministers. In 2000 the church adopted the policy to work toward the civil recognition of same-sex partnerships. In 2003, we called on the Government of Canada to recognize same-sex marriage in the marriage legislation. The debate on some of these issues left tender spots that have taken a long time to heal in many congregations. Justice work doesn’t come without cost.

All of the above underlines the need to balance the hard work of seeking justice with the food our spirits require to keep from burning out: meditation, prayer, rest. We know that if our work in the world is not supported with hearing and testing what God wants, it can go terribly wrong.

One example of this is the tragic history of the Indian Residential Schools. For all the ways the church had disregarded and attempted to destroy Aboriginal culture and spirituality, the United Church made powerful, formal, and dramatic apologies. The first, in 1986, addressed issues related to the church’s role in imposing European culture on First Nations peoples. The second apology, in 1998, addressed the legacy of Indian Residential Schools (see [www.united-church.ca/aboriginal/relationships/apologies](http://www.united-church.ca/aboriginal/relationships/apologies)).

## Where Do You Fit In?

We believe in God...  
who works in us and others by the Spirit

There is a place—a ministry—for everyone, even if you don’t have much time or money. All our ministries are wonderful ways to enter and feel at home in the church. United Church members may attend Sunday worship and help out during the week at a local shelter. They may have to miss many services because of work, but turn out faithfully to support their local camp.

Our ministries don’t work perfectly. The choir sings off-key sometimes, the congregation may have a power struggle, members of a camp board may disagree on any number of issues; these ministries are composed of human beings, after all. Some days you will want to jump ship. But in the midst of it all there is family, and meaning, and life. And when it works, when our little bits of human genius are suitably appreciated (we all do something well, even if it’s sweeping the floor or stuffing envelopes), it heals us and gives us meaning and belonging. It helps us understand we are not alone. God is working “in us and others by the Spirit.” What better reason could there be to become involved in a United Church ministry?

# Conclusion

There is more to the United Church than congregations and other church ministries. What we do when we join together as a whole denomination is a fine story, and you have learned about only a small part of it.

Congregations join together in regional groups, called presbyteries (90). Presbyteries, in turn, are grouped into wider regional bodies called Conferences (13). And there are the meetings of the church's highest governing body, General Council, when 400 United Church members gather to learn and worship, and make decisions that can result in the formation of new groups to study a situation, shift the church's money to new priorities, or bend the ear of government and society on issues such as peace or the economy.

In addition to that, a great deal of work takes place within the national office of the United Church, or the General Council Office as it's known, which supports the work of all church ministries. In fact, there's far more than we can tell you in this small booklet.



*At camp you are part of a United Church ministry.*

*Camp is your family,  
the place where there is wonderful community,  
where your faith is shaped and your soul is touched.*

*By your presence and participation, you affect children  
and youth across Canada and around the world.*

*Thank you for sharing your passion and abilities!*



## **Additional Reading Recommendations:**

*This United Church of Ours*, by Ralph Milton. 2nd edition (Wood Lake Press, 1991)

*This Is Your Church: A Guide to the Beliefs, Policies, and Positions of The United Church of Canada*, by Steven Chambers. 3rd edition (United Church Publishing House, 1993)

*Fire & Grace: Stories of History and Vision*, edited by Jim Taylor (United Church Publishing House, 1999)

*The First Stone: Homosexuality and The United Church*, by Michael Riordan (McClelland & Stewart, 1990)