



The Loyal Opposition: A Brief History of the Renewal Movement in the United Church of Canada, 1966–2010

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The United Church of Canada is widely (and rightly) perceived as occupying a position on the liberal edge of mainline Protestantism.¹ This perception stems from the church's longstanding willingness to embrace critical perspectives on the Bible and traditional teachings, as well as its more recent willingness to discard traditional proscriptions against practices such as homosexuality and abortion. At the same time, however, the United Church has always included a significant number of people of more conservative or evangelical faith. In the last five decades, some of these people have organized themselves into "renewal" or "reform" groups with the goal of promoting their understanding of the faith within the United Church.² Partly because of the predominantly liberal character of the United Church, these groups tend to be overlooked. Their existence and history are not generally well known in the broader evangelical community, nor have they been the subject of much scholarly research.³

Why are these relatively small groups worth studying? First, they are in a sense the remnant of a "mainline" evangelical tradition going back to earlier centuries – a tradition that was once a major force in Canadian life but has now dwindled. They therefore carry a great deal of historical significance going beyond their small

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¹Terms such as "liberal" and "conservative," which are derived from the political realm, can often be misleading as descriptors of religious views. Unfortunately, good alternatives are hard to find. Here the terms are used loosely as convenient and widely understood shorthand for common clusters of beliefs. In this article I use "liberal" to refer to people who believe (a) that the Bible, however valuable it may be, is a product of human religious thought reflecting human limitations and errors, (b) the same is true for traditional statements of belief like the ancient creeds, and (c) current reason and experience should be used to correct or overturn biblical or traditional teachings as part of an ongoing progressive development of human thought. I use "conservative" to refer to people who believe (a) that the Bible is inspired by God and thus speaks with his authority for the church, (b) that there are traditional formulations of faith, such as the creeds, that are correct and therefore binding for Christians, and (c) that these sources set limits to what kinds of beliefs and practices should be accepted in the church, which should not be overturned on the basis of current reason or experience. Finally, I use the term "evangelical" to refer to those conservatives who emphasize the importance of a personal relationship with Christ, conversion as entry into that relationship, and evangelism as a means of bringing people to conversion. For an example of the common perception of the United Church as a liberal denomination, see Mike Milne, "Inside Big Willow," *United Church Observer*, January 2007.

²Sometimes the term "renewal" is distinguished from "reform," with the former referring to efforts targeting individuals in the church and the latter referring to efforts targeting the church as an organized body. For simplicity, in this article "renewal" and "the renewal movement" are used as umbrella terms for both phenomena.

³The only relatively comprehensive scholarly treatment of the United Church renewal movement as a whole is Douglas E. Cowan, "Defending Orthodoxy in the Great White North: The United Church of Canada," chap. 7 in *The Remnant Spirit: Conservative Reform in Mainline Protestantism* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003). Cowan, a sociologist who has also served as an ordained United Church minister, offers an accurate and fair-minded (though generally critical) history of the movement, but he goes only as far as the early 1990s. Lloyd G. Cumming, *The Uncomfortable Pew: Committed to Renewal* (Barrie, Ontario: United Church Renewal Fellowship, 1990) is a personal account of the history of the United Church Renewal Fellowship up to the late 1980s through the eyes of one of its founders and early leaders.

numbers. Second, the renewal groups in the United Church represent part of a much larger movement within many mainline Protestant denominations in North America and Western Europe, which seeks to arrest and reverse the progress of liberalism in these denominations. As an example of this phenomenon, the United Church renewal groups can serve as a source of insights into the movement as a whole. And since the United Church has advanced further down the path of liberalism than most mainline churches, the experiences of the renewal groups in this denomination may be instructive for understanding renewal groups in other denominations that appear to be following a similar trajectory. Third, since the United Church still commands at least the nominal adherence of more Canadians than any other Protestant church, a full understanding of this denomination is an important component of a full understanding of Canadian religion. Without an awareness of the conservative and evangelical renewal groups within the United Church, scholars, journalists, and other commentators can too easily assume that the United Church is monolithically liberal and non-evangelical.

This article and its companion seek to fill the gap in our understanding of the renewal movement in the United Church. The current article provides an overview of the history of the renewal movement in the United Church, including the origins and development of the various renewal groups, for those who are unfamiliar with it. The second article (also in this issue) focuses on explaining the fortunes of these groups and assessing their current situation.

Historical Background: The United Church, 1925–1970

In 1925, Canada's Methodists, Congregationalists, and a large majority of its Presbyterians embarked upon a fascinating experiment by joining together as the United Church of Canada.⁴ To the careful observer, there were already signs that the new church would take up a position on the liberal wing of Protestantism. Liberal theology, with its optimistic conception of history, faith in human reason, and critical attitude to the Bible, was already the predominant theological orientation in the colleges and head offices of the uniting denominations. To be sure, the twenty Articles of Faith in the founding Basis of Union were considerably more conservative than this dominance would suggest (a feature that would make them attractive to the renewal movement decades later), but this conservatism reflected the framers' desire to preserve elements of the historical heritage of the uniting churches and avoid theological conflict, rather than their current theological thinking.⁵ Furthermore, at the urging of the Congregationalists, the framers of the Basis of Union decided not to make the Articles of Faith a creedal test for ministers (reflecting the traditional Congregationalist opposition to such tests). Instead, ministers were required to be in "essential agreement" with the Articles, an elastic phrase that rendered the Articles essentially unenforceable. In some ways, then, the United Church began its life on a liberal path.

Yet the liberalism of the 1925–1960 period, it must be stressed, was a muted, restrained liberalism that remained committed to traditional moral convictions and open to elements of evangelicalism. Robert Wuthnow's observation (in an American context) that the decades leading up to the 1960s were characterized by avoidance of conflict between conservative and liberal positions and emphasis on consensus also applies to the United

⁴On this process, see John Webster Grant, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1967). A more detailed account of the following historical background, with supporting evidence, can be found in Kevin Flatt, "The Survival and Decline of the Evangelical Identity of the United Church of Canada, 1930–1971," (Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, 2008).

⁵Grant, *Canadian Experience*, 32–6.

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Church in these years.⁶ For example, the new denomination did not turn its back on the evangelical popular piety inherited from its predecessors. Quite the opposite: throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the church (particularly through its Board of Evangelism and Social Service) kept the revivalist traditions of the church alive through its support for mass evangelism, notably giving the conservative American evangelist Billy Graham a warm welcome in 1955. Strange as it may seem from our present vantage point, mid-twentieth-century liberals were enthusiastic advocates of any and every type of evangelism they could think of, and frequently spoke of the importance of making a personal commitment to Christ.

Similarly, the church's policies on sexual and family issues, in keeping with the cultural mores of the period, continued to adhere to traditional Christian teaching. As late as 1960, a major official statement by the church bluntly condemned any form of sexual relationship outside heterosexual marriage as "a form of disobedience and rebellion against God."⁷ At the same time, the Christian education curricula used by the church for its Sunday schools were largely aimed at getting children to learn Bible stories, memorize Bible verses, and trust in Christ for salvation, and contained little liberal content. In short, certain liberal hallmarks of later decades – rejection of traditional evangelism, acceptance of non-marital sex, and production of liberal Sunday school curricula – were not seen during this intermediate period.

The 1960s were a period of accelerated change in Western societies, triggering a "religious crisis" for mainline denominations.⁸ The United Church was no exception to this rule. During the turbulent "sixties" the muted liberalism of the early decades gave way to a more activist variety that rapidly reshaped the church and its programs. The most controversial change was the New Curriculum (fully launched in 1964), a Sunday school curriculum for all ages designed to promote among laypeople a liberal perspective on the Bible shaped by historical criticism. Controversy centred on the curriculum's questioning of the historical truth of biblical accounts like the crossing of the Red Sea and the Virgin Birth.⁹ The New Curriculum was followed in 1968 by the New Creed, an alternative to the Apostles' Creed that purposefully omitted the Virgin Birth, hell, and the Second Coming.¹⁰ At the same time the church's approach to evangelism and morality abruptly reversed course. New leaders at the Board of Evangelism and Social Service closed the door on revivalism and strongly criticized Billy Graham (though he continued to remain popular among the rank and file). They also followed what they saw as the leading edge of changing sexual attitudes, softening the church's opposition to extramarital sex and lobbying the federal government to legalize abortion.¹¹

⁶Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 135–53.

⁷United Church of Canada, Commission on Christian Marriage and Divorce, *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, and Marriage* (Toronto: United Church Board of Christian Education, 1960), 7–9.

⁸For a wide-ranging survey of the religious turbulence in Western societies in the 1960s, see Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). On the phenomenon of cultural change in the 1960s more generally, see Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958–c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). On the 1960s in Canada, see Doug Owram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), chaps. 7–11.

⁹Flatt, "Survival and Decline," chap. 3, gives a detailed account of the origins, goals, and content of the curriculum, as well as the ensuing public controversy. For a short summary that minimizes the controversy and echoes the official interpretation of the curriculum put out by the church leadership, see John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 2nd edition (Burlington, ON: Welch Publishing, 1988), 186–7.

¹⁰Flatt, "Survival and Decline," 179–87.

¹¹Flatt, "Survival and Decline," chap. 5.



While many United Church people were either in favour of these changes or resigned to them, at least a substantial minority were opposed – for various reasons – to the New Curriculum, the end of revivalism, and/or moral liberalization. Many of this third group left the denomination for various evangelical churches, or joined the increasing number of mainline Protestants who were simply dropping out of church altogether.¹² A few of them, however, were committed to opposing these changes while staying in the United Church. From this “loyal opposition” the renewal movement was born.

The Pioneers: The United Church Renewal Fellowship and Church Alive

The United Church Renewal Fellowship (UCRF), the first renewal group to form in the United Church, started inconspicuously enough in the summer of 1965. Three ministers from central Ontario – Ron McCaw, Bill Thornloe, and Vic Wood – began meeting privately to exchange worries about the direction of their denomination; by the fall, they were the nucleus of a group of clergy and laypeople meeting regularly at restaurants in Barrie, Orillia, and Richmond Hill.¹³ In the late winter of 1966, after much prayer and deliberation (and some encouragement from Bill Hincks, a missionary on furlough from Zambia), the group decided to organize themselves formally to work publicly for “renewal and revival” in the United Church. By the end of 1966 the group had a constitution and plans for a publication: the UCRF had come to life as the first explicitly evangelical minority group in the history of the denomination.¹⁴ Any United Church member willing to subscribe to the 1925 Basis of Union, plus a conservative statement about the Bible, to “pray and work” for the goals of the Fellowship, and to pay an annual membership fee of three dollars, could become a member of the UCRF.¹⁵ The organization quickly formed local chapters which met for prayer, Bible study, and mutual encouragement.¹⁶

From the beginning, the members of the newborn UCRF made several decisions that defined it as a group and influenced the future course of the renewal movement as a whole. First, they looked to the Articles of Faith in the Basis of Union as a standard of doctrinal orthodoxy for the United Church – although, interestingly, they added a clarifying statement upholding the authority of Scripture as “God’s objective revelation in word written,” indicating their characteristically conservative stress on the importance of this doctrine.¹⁷ Second, they decided to launch a publication (initially a prayer letter) which developed into *The Small Voice*.¹⁸ Renamed *Fellowship Magazine* in the late 1980s, this publication has served as a focal point for the renewal movement down to the present.¹⁹ Both of these decisions – to stress the Articles of Faith and to produce a publication – were echoed by later renewal groups.

¹²For examples of the former, see Flatt, “Survival and Decline,” 127, 131–2. See also Grant, *Church in the Canadian Era*, 187, 195, 203–4.

¹³“The ‘Fellowship,’” 1–2, original UCRF minute book (1965–1968), in the records of the Fellowship Publications office in Barrie, Ontario [hereafter RFP].

¹⁴Minutes, March 12, 1966, 2–3; and Minutes of annual meeting, November 5, 1966, 41, original UCRF minute book, RFP; Cumming, *Uncomfortable Pew*, 27–9.

¹⁵“Constitution of the United Church Renewal Fellowship,” n.d.; “Application for Membership,” n.d., Records of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, box 71, file 3, United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

¹⁶“Words of Welcome,” *Small Voice*, Winter 1968, 1.

¹⁷The fledgling group took this point quite seriously, discussing it several times over the course of 1966 and into 1967. Minutes, March 12, 1966, 3; Minutes, board of directors meeting, May 17, 1966, 15; Minutes, June 13, 1966, 19; Minutes, board of directors meeting, March 9, 1967, 69, original UCRF minute book, RFP. Undoubtedly, this reflects the recent experience of the New Curriculum controversy, which centred on questions of biblical authority and interpretation.

¹⁸Minutes, March 12, 1966, 3.

¹⁹The publication started using the name *Fellowship Magazine* in 1987, although the name *Small Voice* also continued to appear on the cover until mid-1989.

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Two other characteristics of the UCRF, however, served to distinguish them from later groups. The UCRF was committed to an evangelical piety characterized by the centrality of prayer, strong lay involvement, active expectation of spiritual revival, stress on the necessity of personal commitment to Christ, and a focus on disciple-making.²⁰ Elements of this evangelical piety (which had long roots in the history of the United Church and its parent denominations) were also seen in later renewal groups, but in combination they came to distinguish the UCRF. Closely related to this approach was the conscious decision to work for change within the denomination through prayer and grassroots spiritual renewal rather than through involvement in or influence on the governing bodies of the church. To be sure, UCRF members were worried about the direction of the denomination, opposing liberalism in the church colleges, the New Curriculum, and the changes at the Board of Evangelism and Social Service.²¹ But the solution, according to one of the group's founders, layman Lloyd Cumming, would come through spiritual change at the individual level, not by "trying to change the direction of the church through political maneuvering."²²

As the UCRF gradually built up a following of a few hundred members in its first decade (growing from 250 members in the late 1960s to more than 1000 in the late 1970s) it also came under the influence of the charismatic movement that was then sweeping mainline churches, both Catholic and Protestant.²³ With its stress on prayer, divine guidance, and passionate spiritual experience (particularly, what charismatics believed to be the baptism of the Holy Spirit) the charismatic renewal suited the evangelical piety of many UCRF members, and it quickly gained adherents within the young movement. *The Small Voice* began to feature articles stressing the power of the Holy Spirit, miraculous healing, and spiritual warfare.²⁴ At times, tension arose between those who saw the new movement as an answer to prayers for renewal and those who feared it could detract from an emphasis on biblical doctrine or introduce strange teachings. The leadership attempted to steer a middle course that decisively welcomed the charismatic renewal while warning against possible excesses.²⁵ By the 1990s, a broadly charismatic orientation became one of the defining characteristics of the UCRF, and those who had had charismatic experiences outside the UCRF found themselves drawn to the group.²⁶

At the same time that the charismatic renewal was sweeping the UCRF, a different kind of renewal group was emerging within the United Church: this one called itself "Church Alive." Church Alive, like the UCRF, arose in response to the changes of the 1960s, but its composition, orientation, and intended purpose were markedly different from those of the earlier group. The group emerged in 1974 from informal discussions between several clergy with a shared interest in liturgy, who became deeply troubled by what they saw as the drift of

²⁰See, for example, Lloyd G. Cumming to "Dear Friends," July 1967, box marked "Annual Rallies + Annual Meetings, 1970-," RFP, although these emphases permeated nearly all UCRF activities and publications.

²¹J. Berkley Reynolds, "The Hot New Fight . . . For the Good Old Faith," *United Church Observer*, February 15, 1968, 12-14; Editorial, *The Small Voice*, Winter 1968, 2-3.

²²Cumming, *Uncomfortable Pew*, 38, 47.

²³Cumming, *Uncomfortable Pew*, chap. 7. For the numbers, see figure 1 below.

²⁴Robert Rumball, "Rumballing Along," *The Small Voice*, Autumn 1974, 22; Robert Scott, "Healing Love," *The Small Voice*, Summer 1977, 8-9; "Satan Can't Attack You!" *The Small Voice*, Summer 1977, 41.

²⁵Cumming, *Uncomfortable Pew*, 50-1, 56-60. Joe and Carole Burton, leaders within the renewal movement in Newfoundland, offer a similar assessment. Telephone interview with author, August 17, 2010.

²⁶Verna Blackburn, last chair of the UCRF, believes that by the 1990s, most UCRF members were charismatics. She also describes herself as charismatic who got in touch with the UCRF after experiencing the "baptism of the Holy Spirit or whatever you want to call it." V. Blackburn, interview with author, August 3, 2010. Interestingly, even today, when defining the position of Church Alive, president Frank Lockhart says of his organization, "We're not charismatic," without being asked specifically about the issue. Lockhart, interview with author, September 1, 2010.



the denomination into theological chaos.²⁷ A manifesto issued by the group during the Lenten season of 1974, called 15 Affirmations (which among other things affirmed the unique saving power of Christ and the historical reality of his resurrection) garnered the signature of roughly 200 ministers. Later in the year, several of them met at the General Council²⁸ meeting in Guelph to formally establish the new organization Church Alive. Their aim was to address the “theological problem”²⁹ in the church, which meant addressing those on the front lines of theological formation – the church’s ministers. At the suggestion of founding member Ken Barker, the group began producing its own publication, *Theological Digest* (with Barker as editor). Academic in tone, and having ministers as its intended audience, *Theological Digest* summarized and commented on theological articles that intelligently advanced Church Alive’s call to theological orthodoxy.³⁰

The UCRF and Church Alive differed both in purpose and (to a lesser degree) in theological position. Whereas the UCRF had quickly developed into a predominantly lay movement emphasizing prayer and spiritual revival, Church Alive was a movement of clergy with a desire to challenge and shape the thinking of the denomination’s ministers. Where UCRF concerned itself first and foremost with the promotion and revival of experiential spirituality in the United Church, Church Alive sought a return to theological orthodoxy.³¹ At the same time, Church Alive leaders like Graham Scott (minister of a church in what is now Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec) disagreed with the UCRF’s belief in biblical infallibility – an important distinction, especially since the UCRF had made acceptance of this doctrine a condition of membership.³² Important though they may be, however, these differences should not be exaggerated. The new organization recognized the importance of prayer and personal spiritual growth, just as the UCRF recognized the importance of sound doctrine. Despite the disagreement over the infallibility of Scripture, both groups were committed to the twenty Articles of Faith and renewal within the United Church. The founders of Church Alive believed (in what would become a recurring theme of the renewal movement) that their mission of theological reform among the clergy complemented, rather than competed with, the UCRF’s mission of spiritual renewal among the laity, justifying the existence of a separate organization.³³ Thus, heading into the 1980s, the renewal movement already consisted of two separate renewal groups; more were still to come.

The Troubled Eighties

For the United Church, the 1980s were defined by a single conflict in a way that was not true of any other decade since church union. The issue was the church’s position on homosexuality, and the battleground was the question of whether the church would ordain self-described homosexuals engaged in homosexual relationships.³⁴ Through a series of official reports, task forces, study documents, and deferred decisions, the church leadership, with the

²⁷Graham Scott (founding member of Church Alive), interview with author, July 20, 2010; see also Cowan, *Remnant Spirit*, 148. Some of those involved at this stage were Graham Scott, Kenneth Barker, Gordon Ross, G. Campbell Wadsworth, and Victor Fiddes.

²⁸The General Council is the highest governing body of the United Church. Made up of an equal number of clergy and lay representatives from the conferences (the middle level of church government), the General Council met every other year (after 1994, every third year) to set policy and direct the General Council Executive that oversees the national ministries of the church in between these meetings.

²⁹Graham A. D. Scott, “Church Alive Inaugurated,” *The Small Voice*, Autumn 1974, 33.

³⁰Scott interview.

³¹Scott, “Church Alive Inaugurated,” 32–3.

³²Scott interview. Interestingly, Lockhart describes the members of the (now gone) UCRF as having been “biblical literalists” (Lockhart interview) a condemnatory term frequently directed against those with a conservative view of biblical authority in the 1960s. See, for example, Flatt, “Survival and Decline,” 110.

³³Scott, “Church Alive Inaugurated,” 32–3.

³⁴For an early published reference to this debate, see Grant, *Church in the Canadian Era*, 235.

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support of many church members, including the pro-homosexuality lobby group Affirm, sought to ensure the full acceptance of homosexual relationships as legitimate and God-given.³⁵ This process culminated in the decision of the 1988 General Council to declare homosexuals eligible for ordination and the reaffirmation of that decision in 1990, in the face of the opposition of the majority of church members.³⁶

Not surprisingly, the renewal groups, with their conservative theological and moral convictions, became the lightning rod for the groundswell of alarm and protest that emerged in many corners of the church. The resolve of the UCRF to avoid denominational politics broke down in the face of what many simply called “the issue.” By the middle of the decade the UCRF was working hard to influence developments at a national level, and its membership reached an all-time high as worried church members joined the organization for the first time (see figure 1, below).³⁷ Church Alive was likewise drawn into the brewing storm – specifically, by playing a central role in the creation of a third renewal group, the Community of Concern within the United Church of Canada (COC).

The COC originated with the desire of Bill Fritz, minister of Collier St. United Church in Barrie and a member of the UCRF, to do something to prevent the church from accepting the position suggested in the study documents coming from national headquarters. Fritz tapped into the growing concern in the church by stirring up support for action among his extensive network of personal contacts, and offered his church in Barrie as a home for the nascent movement.³⁸ With help from Church Alive, Fritz organized a meeting of interested parties, and by April 1988 an interim organization – united around a “Declaration of Dissent” that affirmed the standard of married faithfulness and chaste singleness – had been established.³⁹ The resulting “Community of Concern” quickly became the focal point of opposition to homosexual ordination and to the legitimization of homosexual relationships generally. Unlike the UCRF or Church Alive, the COC emerged specifically as a lobby group intending to influence denominational decision-making directly. The COC was not at odds with the earlier two groups, however. Both UCRF members (like Bill Fritz) and Church Alive members (like Graham Scott, at this time pastoring a church in Burlington) were involved in establishing the COC, and Church Alive even allowed it to function as an agency of Church Alive until it was able to incorporate and gain charitable status on its own.⁴⁰

³⁵For a summary of these developments, see Cowan, *Remnant Spirit*, 151–63. A longer popular account, which deals with the role of the renewal groups, can be found in Michael Riordon, *The First Stone: Homosexuality and the United Church* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990). Riordon’s disagreement with the basic position of the renewal groups is clear in the book’s content as well as its title.

³⁶The United Church had never explicitly barred people of homosexual orientation from the ministry, though into the 1960s official church statements saw sexual relationships between people of the same sex as sinful (see, for example, *Toward a Christian Understanding*, 15–6). In a narrow sense, then, the decision of the 1988 General Council represented a clarification rather than a change in church policy. Nevertheless, both proponents and opponents of the decision recognized that the larger issue at stake was whether the church deemed homosexual acts or relationships to be immoral, and the implicit “no” given to this question in 1988 did represent a significant change of direction.

Renewal group veterans and Cowan (163) agree that the majority of United Church members were opposed to the 1988 decision. According to the figures given by Bob Blackburn based on his archival research, a very substantial majority (on the order of 70 percent to 95 percent) of petitions sent by congregations and other church groups to the General Councils of 1988 and 1990 on “the issue” were opposed to the ordination of homosexuals. Blackburn concluded that only 6.7 percent of the 1,760 petitions addressed to the 1988 General Council, and only 5.8 percent of the submissions to the 1990 General Council by 1,869 congregations, showed unconditional acceptance of the ordination of self-described homosexuals. Robert H. Blackburn, “A New View of Congregational Opinion about Ordaining Homosexuals,” (n.d.), in the records of the NACC in possession of Geoff Wilkins, North Vancouver [hereafter RNACC]. In an e-mail to the author, October 28, 2010, Blackburn notes that although he presented these figures to a number of church leaders, including the then moderator and general secretary, their accuracy was never challenged.

³⁷See, e.g., Minutes, UCRF Board of Directors, January 16–17, 1985, and April 15, 1985, RFP.

³⁸John Trueman, former president of the COC, interview with author, June 22, 2010; John Howard, former United Church minister, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

³⁹Cowan, *Remnant Spirit*, 157–8.

⁴⁰Scott interview.

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The COC was able to capitalize on the opposition to homosexual ordination as many church members of varying theological stripes who had heretofore avoided (or had never heard of) the renewal groups suddenly took an interest. Frank Lockhart, a minister in Bowmanville, Ontario, had stayed away from the renewal movement up until that point because he saw it as “more right-wing” than his own theological position (which he calls “mostly Barthian”), but the promotion of homosexual ordination made him question the overall direction of the United Church. When Bill Fritz called him up and asked him to get involved with the COC, he agreed to do it.⁴¹ David Dawson, a Hamilton public and corporate affairs consultant, similarly became concerned with developments in the United Church for the first time in the late 1980s because of “the issue.” He quickly found himself on the initial steering committee for the COC, and he has continued to serve the organization in various roles ever since.⁴² Lockhart and Dawson were not alone. Within a few months of being issued, the COC’s “Declaration of Dissent” had garnered more than 30,000 signatories from church members.⁴³ John Trueman, at the time a professor of medieval history at McMaster University and president of the COC from 1990 on, believes the new group reached between 40,000 and 50,000 supporters during this period, dwarfing the other two groups put together.⁴⁴ To be sure, not all of these supporters were theologically attuned to the renewal movement, or even aware of the theological issues involved.⁴⁵ They were, however, upset, and although some of them joined the other renewal groups,⁴⁶ the COC was their main rallying point. As Lockhart puts it, “When you’re mad as hell it’s easy to get a large group together.”⁴⁷

In the end, however, popular opposition and the work of the COC was not enough to derail the drive for homosexual ordination. When the 1988 General Council met in Victoria in August, the sessional committee assigned to deal with the most recent report on “the issue” decided to shelve it and replace it with a more subtly worded set of recommendations with some of the offending elements removed.⁴⁸ Specifically, the recommendations included the twinned statements that sexual orientation was not a barrier to membership, and that all members were eligible to be considered for ordination. The core implication for both supporters and opponents was the same, however; homosexuals would be eligible for ordination. Various attempts by COC members and others at the council to amend or clarify these recommendations (for example, by defining sexual orientation in such a way as to exclude homosexual acts or relationships) were voted down one after another, and when the convoluted debate finally came to an end in the early morning hours, the General Council had decided that homosexuals could be ordained.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Lockhart interview.

⁴² David Dawson, interview with author, August 19, 2010.

⁴³ Cowan, *Remnant Spirit*, 158.

⁴⁴ Trueman interview.

⁴⁵ Bob Blackburn (former COC secretary-treasurer), interview with author, August 3, 2010.

⁴⁶ Gwen Galbraith (then Macpherson), a member of Collier St. United Church in Barrie, joined the UCRF as a result of the SOLM report. She became the UCRF office administrator and circulation manager for *Fellowship Magazine* (positions she now holds with Fellowship Publications) and sits on the boards of Church Alive and the NACC. Galbraith, interview with author, July 9, 2010; Scott interview.

⁴⁷ Lockhart interview.

⁴⁸ The original report, produced by a task force and presented to the General Council, was *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation, Lifestyles and Ministry*, or simply SOLM. The sessional committee produced a statement known as Membership, Ministry, and Human Sexuality, or MMHS. See Cowan, *Remnant Spirit*, 153–6.

⁴⁹ United Church of Canada, Record of Proceedings of the 32nd General Council (August 1988), 95–112.

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Renewal leaders experienced this decision as a severe blow. The following morning, before the council meetings resumed, Graham Scott experienced a “vision of blackness” and a sense that the United Church “had just died.” Scott, who describes himself as a normally unemotional man, was so overcome by grief that he tore the pocket from his shirt, rending his garments like an Old Testament prophet. Others manifested their protest in a more conventional way: by withdrawing from the United Church. Among the several ministers who resigned their membership in the United Church after the 1988 decision was Ken Barker, senior minister of St. Paul’s Church, Orillia, who had served as the secretary of the Community of Concern. Others recommitted themselves to trying to get the next General Council to overturn the decision. When the 1990 General Council met in London, the COC was there, leading a hymn-singing protest march from Metropolitan United Church (a relatively conservative congregation) to the University of Western Ontario, where the council sessions were held.⁵⁰ But despite two years of planning and lobbying, the COC failed to prevent the council from reaffirming the 1988 decision.⁵¹

At this point, many people throughout the renewal movement had had enough. Some had left the United Church after the 1988 General Council; now many more joined them – enough to create an exodus of renewal group supporters and like-minded people that continued into the early 1990s. This exodus from the denomination was reflected in a sharp drop of membership in the renewal groups. The UCRF (the one group for which specific data are available) lost about 70 percent of its members between 1987 and 1991, as its paid-up membership fell from around 2000 to about 600.⁵² By mid-1989 the number of local UCRF chapters had already fallen from 60 to 31 because of the loss of members and resulting difficulty in finding people to run these chapters.⁵³ In 1993, the circulation of the COC newsletter *Concern* was down to 10,000, suggesting that that organization had lost three-quarters of its supporters as well.⁵⁴ Even official statistics for the denomination as a whole show a marked acceleration in the loss of church members, attendees, and participants in Sunday school and through-week programs between 1987 and 1991 compared with the preceding and following 4-year periods (see tables 1 and 2). It is likely that the higher-than-normal rate of decline during this period reflects people leaving the church because of the 1988 and 1990 decisions.

⁵⁰ Metropolitan United Church later joined the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations, discussed below.

⁵¹ Scott interview.

⁵² These are estimates made using the data on income from membership renewals from the UCRF financial statements for 1987–1991, RFP. Since there were two membership rates, one for couples and one for individuals, I have calculated upper and lower estimates (assuming all members joined as couples and all joined as individuals, respectively); the figures given here represent points in between these extremes. Financial reports for the period can be found in a navy duotang marked “General Ledgers, 1986-1988”; an unmarked wood-style binder; and a loose file marked “Board,” RFP. The relevant data on membership fees are found in Lloyd G. Cumming, form letter to supporters, November 26, 1981, file “Archives 1981,” brown UCRF box; and Minutes, UCRF annual meeting, October 31, 1987, in brown binder, RFP.

⁵³ Minutes, UCRF Board of Directors, June 1989, brown binder, RFP.

⁵⁴ “Concern Mailing” (2010), document from David Dawson in possession of author.

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Table 1. United Church members and participants, 1983–1995

Statistic	Totals			Losses		
	1983	1987	1991	1983-1987	1987-1991	1991-1995
Membership	891,852	863,910	785,726	27,942	78,184	57,592
Attendance at Sunday worship	403,590	387,653	332,674	15,937	54,979	29,406
Sunday school membership	246,915	228,779	187,330	18,136	41,449	20,321
Membership in through-week organizations	270,166	260,279	215,837	9,887	44,442	3,778

Source: United Church of Canada, *Yearbook*, 2007

Table 2. Percentage losses of United Church members and participants, 1983–1995

Statistic	Period		
	1983–1987	1987–1991	1991–1995
Membership	3.1% ^a	9.1%	7.3%
Attendance at Sunday worship	3.9%	14.2%	8.8%
Sunday school membership	7.3%	18.1%	10.8%
Membership in through-week organizations	3.7%	17.1%	1.8%

^a Percentages are calculated relative to the starting year for that column (1983, 1987, or 1991)

The Community of Concern had set up a meeting in Oshawa in 1990 to follow the General Council, which (among other things) now faced the reality that people were leaving the denomination and sought to provide guidance to them. COC president John Trueman invited representatives from a number of other denominations – Reformed, Congregationalist, Free Methodist – to speak to the meeting. As Verna Blackburn, an Alberta representative on the COC board at the time, remembers it, the COC leaders knew people were leaving the United Church in large numbers and felt a “pastoral responsibility” to help them find churches that were doctrinally compatible with the convictions of the renewal movement and the twenty Articles of Faith.⁵⁵ Several of the leaders themselves were ready to leave the United Church, including founding member lawyer Gordon Ross, who later joined the Reformed Church of America.⁵⁶ Enough people and congregations left the United Church for a small denomination, the Congregational Christian Churches of Ontario, that it swelled from 7 member congregations to 75 within a few years. Others, however, were not ready to leave. Graham Scott, a member of the COC executive at the time, felt that COC members who held pastorates or other official positions in the church – and wanted to stay in the denomination – were put in an “impossible situation” by the COC’s decision to help people leave. He and Frank Lockhart resigned together from the COC executive and left to concentrate their energies on Church Alive.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ V. Blackburn interview.

⁵⁶ Scott interview.

⁵⁷ Scott interview.

⁵⁸ In more recent years, this division has faded. Scott interview; Dawson interview; Lockhart interview.

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These events created a distance between the COC and Church Alive that lasted for many years.⁵⁸

Living to Fight Another Day?

Once the dust stirred up by “the issue” settled, it was clear that the renewal movement had been reduced greatly in numbers and resources. The three groups, especially the UCRF and the COC, had lost not only members but many of their leaders. At the 1989 annual meeting of the UCRF, six of the board members resigned because they were leaving the United Church, including Joe Campbell, the board chair (who was leaving along with his entire congregation).⁵⁹ That same year, 50 members of Collier Street United in Barrie left to start a new independent congregation, Bethel Community Church, and hired John Howard, an associate minister of Collier Street – and an important voice in the renewal movement, as a former homosexual who saw homosexual behaviour as immoral.⁶⁰ Lloyd Cumming, a prominent early leader of the UCRF, was one of them.⁶¹ The dearth of leadership this exodus created is illustrated by the experience of Bob Blackburn (at the time, chief librarian at the University of Toronto) at his first COC chapter meeting. The news at the meeting was that the secretary had just left the United Church; before the meeting was over, Blackburn, who had never been to a COC meeting before, had the job.⁶² In short, the movement had been seriously depleted in terms of members and leadership.⁶³

Of the three groups that had gone through the battles of the 1980s, the UCRF was hardest hit. It had lost at least half of its leadership and more than two-thirds of its members in a couple of years, and was faced with the expensive and labour-intensive task of supporting a major publication (*Fellowship Magazine*, the successor to the *Small Voice*). Indeed, it seems the active core of UCRF members doubted the usefulness of carrying on at all; at their annual meeting in October 1990, those present voted 40 to 28 (with 6 abstentions) to dissolve the UCRF as a chartered organization. This vote, however, fell short of the required two-thirds majority, so the motion did not carry.⁶⁴ The UCRF struggled along for another seven years, losing another half of its members between 1991 and 1996 (see figure 1).⁶⁵

⁵⁹Cumming, *Uncomfortable Pew*, 141–2.

⁶⁰ Bill Fritz, original force behind the COC and lead pastor at Collier Street, urged his congregation to remain in the United Church, and was deeply disappointed by Howard’s decision. Howard interview.

⁶¹Cumming, *Uncomfortable Pew*, 153–4.

⁶²B. Blackburn interview.

⁶³Blackburn notes that this dearth of leadership was exemplified by his simultaneous holding at one point of the positions of secretary-treasurer of the NACC, treasurer of the UCRF, and treasurer of Fellowship Publications. E-mail to author, October 28, 2010.

⁶⁴Minutes, UCRF annual meeting, October 27, 1990, red binder, RFP. Judging from critical but anonymous handwritten notations on the document, and from the minutes themselves, it seems that in an unusual move over 30 former members who had recently left the UCRF and/or the United Church were permitted to take part in this vote – it is not clear, however, how they voted.

⁶⁵In 1991 the UCRF had between 492 and 615 members; in 1996 the number had dropped to between 231 and 289. Membership estimates based on financial reports for the relevant years (in files labeled “Board” and “UCRF Board of Directors, Financial Statements,” and for 1994–1996, in loose documents, RFP) and membership fees data (Minutes, UCRF annual meeting, October 31, 1987, in brown binder, RFP; Betty Saito, form letter to supporters, June 15, 1989, in file “Membership – General,” UCRF white box, RFP). In October 1990, COC president John Trueman, with the support of the COC executive, wrote the UCRF board of directors suggesting that the two organizations consider joining into a single force for renewal, but as far as can be determined from the extant records of the UCRF, nothing came of this proposal. Trueman to UCRF board of directors, October 26, 1990, red binder, RFP.

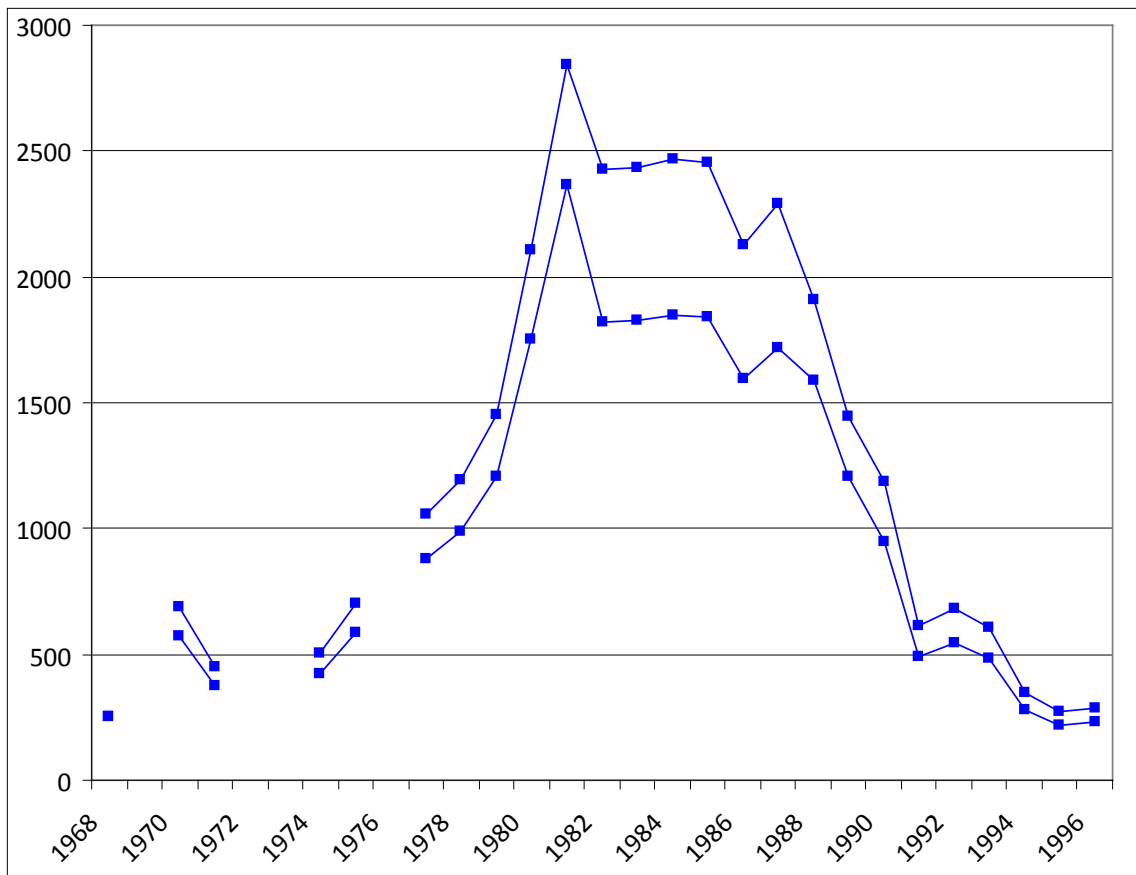
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Figure 1. UCRF membership, upper and lower estimates, 1968–1996



Note: Since there were two membership rates, a regular individual rate and a discounted rate for members who joined as couples, these are lower and upper estimates of paid-up members (assuming all members joined as individuals and all joined as couples, respectively) calculated by dividing membership renewal income by the relevant membership fee figures.

Sources: Membership renewal income data in UCRF financial reports, 1970–1997, various files, RFP; membership fee data in “Notice of Fourth Annual Meeting on October 18, 1969,” file “UC Renewal Fellowship, Early Years,” box marked “Annual Rallies + Annual Meetings, 1970–”; Lloyd G. Cumming to unidentified recipients, November 26, 1981, file “Archives 1981,” box marked “Archives Files”; Minutes, UCRF annual meeting, October 31, 1987, brown binder, RFP; 1968 figure from J. Berkley Reynolds, “The Hot New Fight... For the Good Old Faith,” *United Church Observer*, February 15, 1968, 12.

Fellowship Magazine, however, was doing relatively well. In the first half of the 1990s the magazine grew beyond its shrinking base of UCRF supporters and assumed a role as the flagship publication of the renewal movement, with representatives from the other renewal groups on its editorial advisory committee.⁶⁶ During the same period, the magazine moved from a subscription-based model to a donation-based model of funding, a risky move that paid off as circulation rebounded to the 6000–8000 range by 1994 and stayed there through the rest of the decade (compared to a low of 2000 in 1992), while the magazine maintained a healthy income.⁶⁷ In 1995 the UCRF took the logical step of setting up a separate organization, Fellowship Publications, to publish *Fellowship Magazine*. The new organization was run by a volunteer board of directors made up of equal representation from

⁶⁶“Fellowship Magazine Organization Structure,” April 20, 1994.

⁶⁷For circulation data for 1992 and 1995–1999, see “Mailing Report,” December 14, 1992, unlabelled loose file, RFP; and Canada Post statements of mailing for 1995–1999, box marked “Annual Rallies + Annual Meetings, 1970–,” RFP. On the move to a donation model, increasing magazine income, and circulation data for 1994, see Minutes, Renewal Fellowship annual meeting, October 29, 1994, red binder, RFP.

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each of the four renewal groups: the UCRF, the Community of Concern, Church Alive, and the newest group, the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations (about which more below).

Having ensured the survival of *Fellowship Magazine* as a magazine of the whole movement, and with its membership down to a low of about 250 (numbers not seen since the first few years of the movement), the UCRF had reached the end of the road. In 1997 it formally dissolved itself as a separate organization, merging into the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations (NACC), after its last chair, Verna Blackburn, obtained assurances that the UCRF's largely charismatic membership would be welcome to join the congregation-based NACC as individuals.⁶⁸ Interestingly, informal "Renewal Fellowship" rallies have continued to be held in Newfoundland twice a year since 1997 (a tradition that began in the 1970s), attracting between 100 and 300 attendees, although no chartered Renewal Fellowship organization exists.⁶⁹ Gwen Galbraith, office administrator for Fellowship Publications, cheerfully remarks that "somebody has not let them know that the UCRF doesn't exist anymore."⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the merger with the NACC brought to a close the 30-year history of the United Church's first renewal organization.

While the UCRF was fatally wounded by the exit of evangelical church members in 1988–90, another group was being formed to help evangelical and conservative congregations remain within the United Church: the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations. Over one thousand congregations in the church had opposed the 1988 decision, and some of them left their properties behind in order to withdraw from the denomination (in the United Church, the denomination owns the church property).⁷¹ Other congregations were not ready to take this step, however, but still wanted to indicate their dissent from the direction of the General Council.⁷² In the summer of 1990, before the General Council that reaffirmed the 1988 decision, four ministers in rural Alberta decided to put together a short statement reaffirming their commitment to the doctrine of the Basis of Union, and to traditional morality. Soon, these "Alberta Articles" were circulating among conservative congregations in Alberta and elsewhere.⁷³

At a national COC meeting in Oshawa later that year, one of those pastors, Bob Aldrich, reported on these developments, catching the attention of Bob Blackburn, who formulated the idea of a national association of congregations based on the Alberta Articles. In his view, such an association would have the advantage of allowing conservative congregations to take an organized national stand, and thereby remain in the United Church keeping both their integrity and their property. Blackburn convinced the COC president, John Trueman, that the COC should back this idea.⁷⁴ The COC formed a committee to develop a constitution for the new organization, and provided the financial support needed to make it happen, though the UCRF and Church Alive (despite recent disagreements) also had representation on the committee.⁷⁵

⁶⁸V. Blackburn interview; Minutes, NACC annual meeting, April 18–19, 1997, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.

⁶⁹J. and C. Burton interviews; Carole Burton, e-mail to author, August 19, 2010.

⁷⁰Galbraith interview.

⁷¹As Gwen Galbraith points out, when a congregation leaves the United Church, "You leave the pencils behind." Galbraith interview. A total of 1,230 congregations sent petitions to the 1988 General Council rejecting the report containing the recommendation that practicing homosexuals be ordained, compared to only 43 that sent petitions in favour. Blackburn, "A New View of Congregational Opinion."

⁷²Geoff Wilkins, interview with author, July 15, 2010.

⁷³Bob Blackburn, "Proposal by Telephone," undated document from Blackburn in possession of author, 1–2; Cowan, *Remnant Spirit*, 164.

⁷⁴Blackburn, "Proposal by Telephone," 1; B. Blackburn interview.

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The Alberta Articles had already received formal support from congregations in Alberta and the London area who were forming regional associations. Over the next few months, Blackburn generated additional support for the Alberta Articles in various regions of the country. A golden opportunity arose in the summer of 1991 when he needed to drive from his home in Mississauga to Vancouver to deliver a car for a friend. During his cross-country drive, Blackburn met with individuals and congregations, drumming up support for the Articles and the idea of a national association of congregations.⁷⁶ In the course of this trip, he met with a number of people who became important NACC supporters, including Geoff Wilkins, a retired school superintendent from North Vancouver (who in time went on to become the secretary-treasurer and then national chair of the NACC).⁷⁷ Finally, in September 1991, at a meeting at Metropolitan United Church in London, the NACC was formally inaugurated with 81 founding member congregations from across the country, and regional associations in Alberta, the London area, Central Ontario, and the Maritimes.⁷⁸

Why did the COC and the other two renewal groups agree that a fourth group was needed? The main difference between the NACC and the other groups was that the NACC was based on the membership of congregations rather than individuals. The NACC's founders believed this had a number of advantages. It allowed congregations that otherwise would have left the United Church to keep their property by remaining in the church while still setting themselves apart from the rest of the denomination in a visible way. At the time, it was also thought that the formal role of congregations in the denominational organizational structure would provide a congregationally based organization to exert more effective influence on the decisions of the church courts.⁷⁹ Finally, the NACC's founders hoped that by taking a collective stand, congregations could better nurture and protect their biblical convictions than could isolated individuals in a congregation, particularly when it came to calling a minister. To this end, for example, the NACC established a pastoral referral service (at the suggestion of Verna Blackburn) to link conservative ministers seeking jobs with conservative congregations seeking a minister.⁸⁰ The distinct purpose of the NACC did not preclude co-operation with the other groups, however; the COC played a central role in establishing the organization, as we have seen, and representatives from all three groups served on the NACC board or at least attended NACC meetings.⁸¹

It therefore came about that the renewal movement consisted of four different groups until the dissolution of the UCRF (although Fellowship Publications continued to exist as a separate entity from 1995 onward). With the exception of the UCRF, the other groups were able not only to survive the crisis of 1988–1990, but, surprisingly, to build support and momentum. As has already been mentioned, the circulation of *Fellowship Magazine* roughly tripled from 1992 to 1994, and continued to be more than 6000 for the remainder of the decade. Graham Scott, who took over the editorship of *Theological Digest* in 1990 because of Ken Barker's departure from the United Church, expanded the content dealing with current affairs inside the United Church and beyond, renaming the magazine *Theological Digest and Outlook* to reflect this wider focus.⁸² By entering into a publication agreement

⁷⁵Robert H. Blackburn, secretary-treasurer, NACC, to "Dear Friends," October 1, 1991, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.

⁷⁶Blackburn, "Proposal by Telephone," 2.

⁷⁷B. Blackburn interview; Wilkins interview.

⁷⁸Blackburn to "Dear Friends," October 1, 1991.

⁷⁹B. Blackburn interview.

⁸⁰Minutes, NACC annual meeting, April 21, 1994, 6, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC; B. Blackburn, e-mail to author, October 28, 2010.

⁸¹For example, the NACC board in 1994 included Carole Burton, an active UCRF supporter, and Graham Scott of Church Alive brought official greetings and support for closer cooperation. Minutes, NACC annual meeting, April 21, 1994, 1–2, 4, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.

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with Fellowship Publications that *Theological Digest and Outlook* would be bound inside *Fellowship Magazine* in a joint mailing once per year, the Church Alive publication was able to gain a wider readership. Meanwhile, the COC found issues other than “the issue” worth pursuing through its lobbying efforts. It continued to publish its newsletter *Concern*, the circulation of which climbed from about 10,000 in 1993 to about 13,000 in 1999.⁸³ Finally, the newest organization, the NACC, grew its membership from 81 congregations in 1991 to a peak of about 120 in 1998.⁸⁴

In many respects, these groups were still drawing much of their energy from the battles of the late 1980s. Many of the leaders had become involved with the renewal movement at this time, and “the issue” had provided the initial impetus for the founding of both the COC and the NACC. Even though that battle had been lost, concern for the state of the denomination as a whole continued to be a central thread of the renewal movement in the 1990s – indeed, most renewal movement supporters saw the rift over homosexuality as merely symptomatic of deeper divisions about matters like the authority of Scripture.

The groups continued to criticize actions and decisions that went against their convictions, such as the publication of a new hymnal, *Voices United* (1996), which used feminine language for God while removing words like “Father” from the hymns and “Lord” from the Psalms, or the statements of Moderator Bill Phipps to the *Ottawa Citizen’s* editorial board in 1997 indicating that he did not believe in the full deity of Christ or his resurrection “as a scientific fact.”⁸⁵ The COC, of course, continued to fulfill its *raison d’être* by lobbying the church courts and head office on various issues. Scott regularly produced an editorial feature for *Theological Digest and Outlook* called “Palms & Scorpions, Cheers & Tears,” which commented positively or negatively on recent news; developments emanating from United Church headquarters not infrequently merited “scorpions” or “tears.”⁸⁶ The NACC, with assistance from the other groups, set up a legal defence fund for renewal-minded ministers and congregations.⁸⁷ This move was prompted by the difficulties of Ted Wigglesworth, a minister who in 1997 was dismissed (wrongfully, he alleged) from his Alberta congregation by his presbytery while he was serving as NACC chair, and who ultimately turned to the civil courts for redress after the church courts did not vindicate him.⁸⁸ Like the other groups, the NACC also kept a worried eye on the general numerical decline of the denomination.⁸⁹ The specific issues, however, were less significant than the continuing desire throughout the renewal groups to call the church back to the Articles of Faith, as they understood them.

⁸² Scott interview.

⁸³ “Concern Mailing.”

⁸⁴ Blackburn to “Dear Friends,” October 1, 1991; Minutes, NACC annual meeting, April 29–30, 1998, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.

⁸⁵ Blackburn to “Dear Friends,” October 1, 1991; Minutes, NACC annual meeting, April 29–30, 1998, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.

⁸⁶ Carole Burton, regional report of the Newfoundland and Labrador Alliance of Covenanting Congregations to the 2004 annual general meeting of the NACC; Bob Blackburn, “Words of Hope from the Acting Chairman,” attachment to Minutes, NACC annual meeting, June 10–11, 1999, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC. For Phipps’s remarks, see Bob Harvey, “I don’t believe Jesus was God’: United Church’s new moderator rejects Bible as history book,” *Ottawa Citizen*, October 24, 1997, A1.

⁸⁷ Scott interview.

⁸⁸ Minutes, NACC annual meeting, April 18–19, 1997, 5, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.

⁸⁹ Dave Snihur, NACC chair, to NACC congregations, April 24, 1997, loose material, RFP. “Notes on the Planning Session,” attachment to Minutes, NACC annual meeting, April 29–30, 1998, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.



Renewal in the Third Millennium

As the renewal movement moved into the twenty-first century, however, the painful memories of 1988 and 1990 began to fade. Some renewal leaders became concerned that their persistent attempts to serve as “watchdogs” for the church had given them a reputation as naysayers and reactionaries. In three of the groups, there was a shift towards a softer, more positive approach. Diane Walker, who became senior editor of *Fellowship Magazine* in 2000, tried to have the publication adopt a tone that would be less combative and more positive, symbolized by a change in the magazine’s tagline from “Upholding the historic Christian faith in the United Church of Canada” to “Celebrating the historic Christian faith in the United Church of Canada.”⁹⁰ At the same time her husband, Paul Miller, took over the editorship of *Theological Digest and Outlook* from Graham Scott (who understandably stepped down after 10 years as voluntary editor). Miller made similar changes, thereby encouraging a more upbeat tone for Church Alive.⁹¹ Similar developments were afoot at the NACC, where Geoff Wilkins became national chair in 2002. Wilkins was no stranger to critical commentary, having kept a wary eye on denominational developments during his time as secretary-treasurer,⁹² but as chair he saw a need for the organization to refocus on helping local congregations share the gospel, and moving beyond a “fortress” approach to take advantage of what he hoped was a more welcoming climate in the United Church.⁹³ Even the *United Church Observer* noticed the change, printing an article on the supposed “Mellowing of the Right,” (although it should be noted that Wilkins believes this portrait was overdrawn).⁹⁴

Nevertheless, the softening tone at Fellowship Publications, Church Alive, and the NACC was also noticed by the COC, which continued to prefer a more hard-edged approach. For instance, David Dawson, vice-president of the COC, was disappointed that *Fellowship Magazine* did not take a more critical tone in its September 2009 issue, which interviewed the denomination’s general secretary, Nora Sanders.⁹⁵ At the same time, the shift to a more positive approach in three of the renewal groups did not preclude occasional criticism of denominational directions by these groups. For example, the NACC opposed a new faith statement called the “Song of Faith” adopted by the 2006 General Council, and unsuccessfully tried to have it put to a remit (a plebiscite of all congregations required for changes to the Basis of Union).⁹⁶ Indeed, in 2007, as a result of the “Song of Faith,” Wilkins suggested that the NACC might once again have to take up a role as “public critic.”⁹⁷ This observation serves as a reminder that it is too early to tell whether the softer approach of some of the groups will prove to be a long-term trend, or whether (as seems more likely) they will once again find themselves in the role of watchdogs as controversial issues arise.

⁹⁰Diane Walker, interview with author, July 30, 2010.

⁹¹Scott interview.

⁹²See, for example, his reports to the 1998 and 2001 annual general meetings of the NACC, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.

⁹³Minutes, NACC annual meeting, May 17, 2002, 2; Annual report of the chairman, April 2003, 2, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.

⁹⁴Mike Milne, “Mellowing of the Right,” *United Church Observer*, June 2007, 22–3. Wilkins, discussion with author, July 11, 2010.

⁹⁵Dawson interview.

⁹⁶See, for example, Geoff Wilkins, “Chairman’s Report, 2006 AGM,” 1–2; Wilkins, “Chairman’s Report, 2007 AGM,” 2, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC. Some of the objections to the Song of Faith concerned the use of feminine and non-Trinitarian language for God, an implicitly liberal view of Scripture, and passages suggesting pantheism and universalism.

⁹⁷Wilkins, “Chairman’s Report, 2007 AGM,” 2.

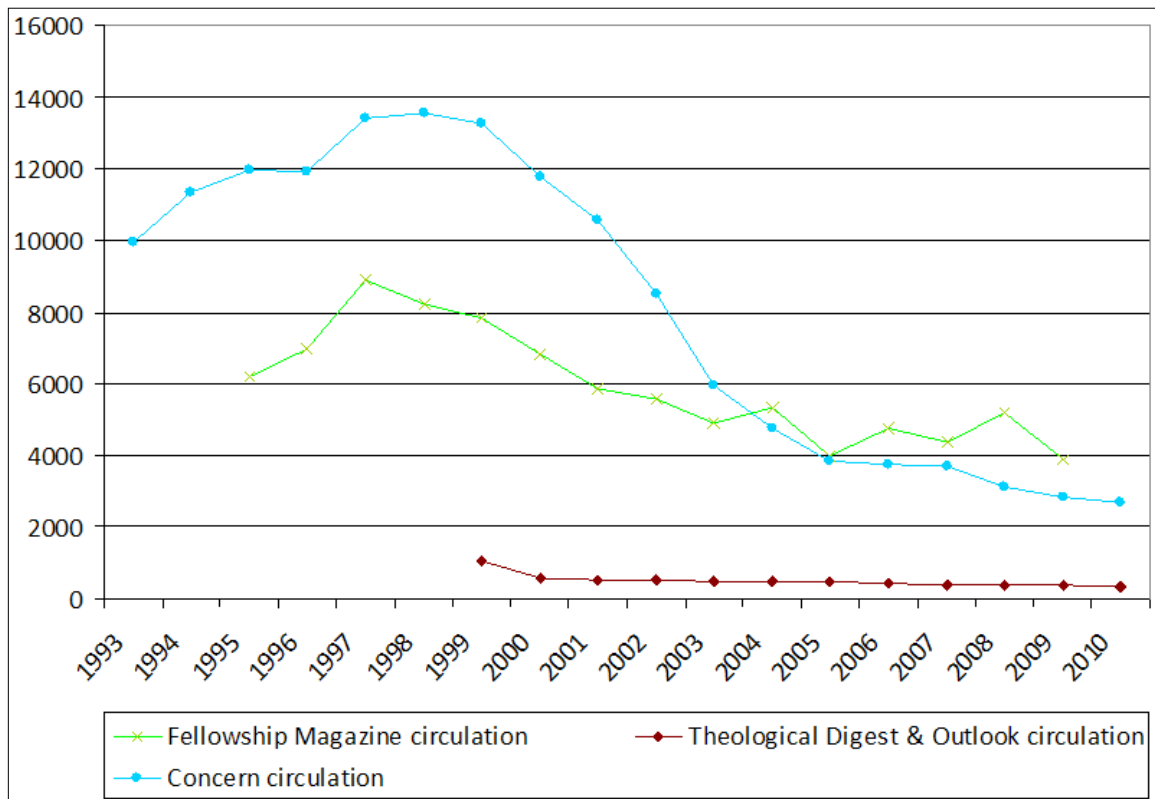
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The other significant trend of the first decade of the twentieth century for the renewal groups was a slide in membership and circulation numbers. The NACC declined from its 1998 peak of about 120 member congregations to under 75 by 2010.⁹⁸ *Fellowship Magazine's* circulation fell from just under 9,000 in 1997 to just under 4,000 in 2009 (see figure 2). The circulation of *Concern*, the magazine of the COC, fell even more rapidly, from a high point of 13,500 in 1998 to 2,700 by 2010 – partly reflecting the removal of inactive members who had been added through the mass sign-up of names from church directories in the 1990s.⁹⁹ Even the circulation of Church Alive's *Theological Digest and Outlook*, which was much lower to begin with, fell from more than 1,000 in the late 1990s to 340 in 2010.¹⁰⁰ *Fellowship Magazine* and *Theological Digest and Outlook* were also facing severe financial difficulties; the September 2010 issue of the latter may be last.¹⁰¹ A related problem was the aging of the movement's leaders – most of whom were well past retirement age – without, it appeared, a new generation of younger leaders waiting in the wings. In many ways, these changes are simply a microcosm of the problems facing the United Church as a whole, but they pose a more immediate existential threat to small volunteer-based renewal groups with minimal financial resources than to the denomination as a whole.

Figure 2. Circulation of renewal publications, 1993–2010



Sources: "Concern Mailing," undated document from David Dawson in possession of the author; Canada Post statements of mailing of *Fellowship Magazine* for 1995–1999, box marked "Annual Rallies + Annual Meetings, 1970–," RFP; Canada Post statements of mailing of *Fellowship Magazine* for 2000–2009 supplied by Gwen Galbraith; Norm Hockridge (Church Alive treasurer), e-mail to author, July 26, 2010.

⁹⁸Wilkins interview.

⁹⁹"Concern Mailing"; Dawson interview.

¹⁰⁰Norm Hockridge (Church Alive treasurer), e-mail to author, July 26, 2010.

¹⁰¹Walker interview; Scott interview.

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In recent years, declining support and aging leadership have never been far from the minds of most of the renewal groups' leaders, and some of them have proposed major changes to the movement. Fellowship Publications, in cooperation with the NACC in particular, has been spearheading initiatives to reach out to a younger generation of evangelical/conservative leaders in the United Church – if they can be found. One of these is a single-issue magazine, *Cruxifusion*, published in September 2010 by Fellowship Publications with financial help from Church Alive, the COC, and the NACC. Young clergy and lay leaders were invited to contribute articles, and were given free rein to write as they saw fit.¹⁰²

A second initiative is a conference planned for April 2011 aimed at much the same kind of people invited to write for *Cruxifusion* – emerging leaders sympathetic to the renewal movement but not currently involved in running it. Diane Walker of *Fellowship Magazine* and Geoff Wilkins of the NACC hope this event will generate a new organizational configuration with a new approach that will carry forward the hope of renewal.¹⁰³ In anticipation of this development, and in recognition of the challenges it faces, the NACC voted to dissolve itself at its annual meeting this past May, placing its resources at the disposal of Fellowship Publications.¹⁰⁴ At the time of writing, the Community of Concern and Church Alive are taking a “wait and see” approach before similarly committing to this venture, citing a number of questions: Will the conference invitees be likely to take up the challenge of organizing a new group when they have avoided involvement in the existing ones? How would a new group be funded? Would the new group carry out the variety of tasks represented by the existing groups, including maintaining a critical voice in the denomination?¹⁰⁵

When asked what the future of the renewal movement is, Wilkins (who has seen his share of work and struggle over the years) seems remarkably at peace. The way he sees it, the current groups, their current membership, and their current leaders (including him) have done their best to maintain a witness to traditional Christianity in the United Church, but are now out of energy and ideas.¹⁰⁶ He believes the way forward is to hand over responsibility to a new generation – to either carry the movement forward or let it rest from its labours. Pausing, he adds, “If this doesn’t work, I think it’s curtains for the United Church.”

Either way, he says, the future is in God’s hands. 

¹⁰²Walker interview; Dawson interview.

¹⁰³Walker interview; Wilkins interview.

¹⁰⁴NACC press release, May 8, 2010, http://www.unitedrenewal.org/archives/2010/05/press_release_n.php.

¹⁰⁵Lockhart interview; Dawson interview.

¹⁰⁶Wilkins interview.