

## A Mainline Minority: Assessing the Present State of the United Church Renewal Movement

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Although the United Church of Canada is for the most part a theologically and morally liberal church, it is also home to an organized movement of evangelical and other conservative Christians.<sup>1</sup> This “renewal movement,” which at the time of writing consists of four distinct organizations, sees itself as a voice for key elements of traditional Christianity within the United Church. A brief history of the movement is contained in the companion article to this one, also in this issue of *Church & Faith Trends*, while the current article seeks to answer a number of questions about the present state of the renewal movement. After explaining the main goals of the renewal movement and briefly evaluating the movement’s success in achieving them, the article determines the current size of the renewal movement and identifies the main factors supporting and limiting the growth of the movement in recent years and at present. The article concludes with some observations about the significance of these factors for the immediate future of the movement.

### Assessing the Movement: Pastoral and Political Goals

As organizations of evangelical and conservative members of the United Church, the renewal groups have consistently sought to pursue two different sets of goals. On the one hand, they have tried to build movements that would organize Evangelicals and conservatives within the church for mutual support – nurturing evangelical faith and conservative convictions among their members, providing encouragement, and allowing them to remain within the United Church “with integrity,” that is, while visibly dissenting from dominant trends within the denomination.<sup>2</sup> These are what could be called the pastoral goals of the movement. On the other hand, the renewal groups have also sought to influence the direction of the denomination as a whole beyond their immediate constituency, by lobbying decision makers, publicly stating their support for or (more often) their opposition to proposed denominational initiatives, and more generally, acting as a conservative voice within the liberal denomination. These are what could be called the political goals of the movement.

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<sup>1</sup>As in the companion article in this issue of *Church & Faith Trends*, I use the terms “liberal,” “evangelical,” and “conservative” with specific meanings. In this article “liberal” refers 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. The use of a related term, “evangelically aligned,” is explained below.

<sup>2</sup>The quoted phrase comes from Carole Burton, an active figure in the renewal movement in Newfoundland, describing what the renewal movement has meant to her and her husband Joe. Telephone interview with author, August 17, 2010.

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To be sure, some groups have focused more on one or the other of these two sets of goals.<sup>3</sup> The late United Church Renewal Fellowship (UCRF), particularly over its first two decades, tended to stress the pastoral function, while the Community of Concern (COC) has always focused on the political function. Groups have also shifted their focus over time: in the 1990s the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations (NACC) had a more strongly political role, which it intentionally backed away from somewhat in the following decade to reemphasize pastoral responsibilities. Nevertheless, most of the groups at most times have pursued both sets of goals. Even the largely pastoral UCRF found itself drawn into heavy political activity during the homosexuality controversy in the 1980s, while the largely political COC has carried out an important pastoral role through its extensive national network of personal contact with its often elderly supporters by mail and phone.<sup>4</sup> The movement as a whole, therefore, has pursued both pastoral and political goals and should be assessed for its accomplishments in both areas.

When asked to assess the success or failure of the renewal movement in accomplishing these goals, current and former leaders and participants are nearly unanimous in their judgment that the movement has mostly failed to achieve its political goals.<sup>5</sup> Despite letter-writing campaigns, speeches on the floor of General Council meetings, personal meetings with church officials, and even protest marches, the movement has failed to prevent the United Church from moving in a liberal direction on issue after issue: the use of feminine language for God, homosexual ordination, the controversial worship resources *Voices United* and *More Voices*, the denial of the deity of Christ by then-moderator Bill Phipps in 1997, and more recently, the “Song of Faith” statement adopted by the 2006 General Council. In words widely echoed by those interviewed for this article, Helga Schimmel (formerly Helga Churchward), former office administrator for the UCRF, says that while they had “influence here and there,” it was “not enough to steer the whole ship around.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, there are a few qualifications to this broadly negative assessment. David Dawson, vice-president of the COC (and, in the absence of a president, *de facto* leader of the organization) thinks that although the political success of his group has been “minimal,” it has forced the denominational leadership to at least “look over their shoulder” and consider what opposition they might encounter from conservatives in the church when proposing new liberal initiatives.<sup>7</sup> John Trueman, former president of the COC, points to the moral and financial support given by the movement to Ted Wigglesworth, a former NACC chair who was dismissed from his pastoral position in Alberta by his presbytery, in his fight for vindication through the church and civil courts.<sup>8</sup> The senior editor of *Fellowship Magazine*, Diane Walker, notes that the movement has kept an alternative viewpoint before the attention of denominational decision makers.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup>For more information about which groups have pursued which goals at different times, see the companion article in this issue of *Church & Faith Trends*.

<sup>4</sup>Dawn Trueman, interview with author, June 22, 2010.

<sup>5</sup>This opinion was voiced (usually with qualifications such as those mentioned below) in the following interviews with the author: Scott Boughner (United Church minister), June 23, 2010; Helga Schimmel (formerly Churchward; former office administrator for the UCRF), July 5, 2010; John Trueman (former president of the COC), June 22, 2010; David Dawson (vice-president of the COC), August 19, 2010; Frank Lockhart (president of Church Alive), September 1, 2010; Diane Walker (senior editor of *Fellowship Magazine*), July 30, 2010. In 2009, Geoff Wilkins, chair of the NACC, told the organization’s annual general meeting that the NACC’s “efforts to advocate for a biblically based, Christ-focused, apostolic faith within the wider church have been consistently stymied.” Wilkins, “Chairman’s Report to the 2009 AGM,” 3, Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, in the records of the NACC in possession of Geoff Wilkins, North Vancouver [hereafter RNACC].

<sup>6</sup>Schimmel interview.

<sup>7</sup>Dawson interview.

<sup>8</sup>J. Trueman interview.

<sup>9</sup>Walker interview.



All of these leaders, however, would agree with the overall conclusion that the movement has not achieved its political goals. And from a longer-term historical perspective, it is clear that they are right. During the last four decades – the period of renewal activity – the United Church has continued along a firmly liberal path marked out in the 1960s, with nary a glance to either side. For a variety of reasons, conservatives in the United Church have not been able to achieve the kind of theological turnaround accomplished by conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention during the same period.<sup>10</sup>

What about the movement's pastoral goals? Here the assessment offered by movement leaders and participants is much more positive. They are quick to recall stories of isolated United Church members being thrilled to discover that they are not alone in their views; of members on the verge of leaving, instead deciding to stay and work because of the movement; of members who feel that the movement has allowed them to hang on to both their integrity *and* their United Church affiliation.<sup>11</sup> Particularly poignant are the stories of elderly churchgoers who feel bewildered by what is happening in their congregations and hang on to the renewal movement like a lifeline.<sup>12</sup> The renewal movement has also helped conservative congregations stay in the United Church; without the existence of the NACC, the bulk of the members of many of the roughly 100 congregations that joined in the early 1990s would probably have left the denomination en masse (joining the many other congregations or portions of congregations who did just that), leaving behind nothing but their property and their memories.<sup>13</sup> But has the movement really succeeded in providing a home for evangelical/conservative members of the church? To answer this question, it is necessary to look at the current size of the groups relative to the United Church as a whole, and more specifically, their size relative to the evangelical minority within the denomination.

## How Big Is the Renewal Movement?

There are two types of renewal group membership: the NACC has congregational membership, while the other groups have individual membership (or individual subscriptions).

The NACC (which is currently in a process of dissolution, as described below) has roughly 72 member congregations. Using relatively recent information in the NACC national office records in North Vancouver, I have been able to identify 65 of these congregations that were members in 2008 (the most recent year for which denominational statistics are available) and for whom statistics are available in the United Church yearbook.<sup>14</sup> In 2008, these 65 member congregations amounted to 2.0 percent of the 3,308 congregations in the United Church. In total, they had an estimated 13,051 members and 5,770 attendees on an average Sunday, which works out 2.5 percent

<sup>10</sup>For one account of the remarkable conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention, see Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 187–98.

<sup>11</sup>Gwen Galbraith (office administrator of Fellowship Publications and circulation manager of *Fellowship Magazine*), interview with author, July 9, 2010; Geoff Wilkins (last chair of the NACC), interview with author, July 15, 2010; Dawson interview; Walker interview; C. and J. Burton interviews.

<sup>12</sup>J. Trueman interview.

<sup>13</sup>Many congregations or large portions of congregations made this decision and ended up joining what became the Congregational Christian Churches in Canada. Lloyd G. Cumming, *The Uncomfortable Pew: Committed to Renewal* (Barrie, Ontario: United Church Renewal Fellowship, 1990), 141–9.

<sup>14</sup>The figure of 72 total member churches is from Geoff Wilkins. I have been able to identify 65 of these based on examination of extant records in the NACC files, including mentions of individual congregations in a wide variety of documents, such as minutes of annual general meetings, as well as lists of member congregations in pamphlets distributed by the NACC. Twenty-three of the identifiable congregations are part of multi-point pastoral charges containing two or three NACC congregations.

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and 3.0 percent of the denominational totals respectively.<sup>15</sup> These numbers should be treated cautiously, however, since the NACC has been plagued with problems of inactivity and lack of communication from member congregations.<sup>16</sup> It has not been unusual for member congregations to go for years without any contact with the regional or national associations, even in the face of attempts by these bodies to establish communication. In other cases many members of the member congregations are not even aware that they are part of the NACC. It would be potentially misleading, therefore, to refer to these 13,051 members and 5,770 attendees as individually being “members” of the renewal movement.<sup>17</sup>

The three groups oriented towards individuals – Fellowship Publications, the Community of Concern, and Church Alive – have publications whose circulation serves as a basis for estimating the total number of supporters of the renewal movement. *Fellowship Magazine* serves as the flagship publication of the renewal movement. Its circulation of 3,871 (for 2009, the most recent year for which data are available) fortunately includes active individual members of NACC churches.<sup>18</sup> Circulation of *Concern*, the publication of the COC, stands at 2,714, while circulation of *Theological Digest and Outlook*, the publication of Church Alive, is 340 (both figures are for 2010).<sup>19</sup> Circulation of these latter two groups includes all households which have at least one member of the COC or Church Alive respectively.<sup>20</sup>

Translating these figures into a total number of renewal movement supporters presents some challenges. On the one hand, some people subscribe to more than one of these magazines, so the figures cannot be totaled without first eliminating this overlap. On the other hand, many households which receive one copy of a renewal publication actually contain two supporters (usually a married couple) or more.<sup>21</sup> Using estimates provided by the three organizations of (a) overlap in subscriptions, and (b) proportions of subscribing households with two members, it is possible to arrive at a rough estimate of **7,400 total individual supporters** of the movement. (See appendix 1 for the calculation used to arrive at this estimate.) Since all three organizations regularly purge their subscription lists by removing individuals who have not recently sent in a donation or at least a letter of support,

<sup>15</sup>Data are from the United Church of Canada *Yearbook* (2009). The estimation arises from the fact that 10 of these NACC congregations are part of multi-point pastoral charges together with non-NACC congregations, but the yearbook gives figures only for the whole pastoral charge. In these cases, I have simply evenly divided the numbers for the pastoral charge by the number of congregations (or “preaching places”) in the charge to arrive at estimated totals for the NACC congregations. Given that only 10 congregations are involved, and that the method is probably equally likely to overestimate or underestimate the size of the NACC congregation(s) in any given case, any resulting errors from this method are unlikely to materially affect the results.

<sup>16</sup>For example, see blunt assessments such as Frank Werth, “2003 Report: Alberta Association of Covenanting Congregations”; Geoff Wilkins, “Report of the Secretary Treasurer,” April 2001; Carole Burton, “Report of Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Covenanting Congregations,” May 2003; Frank Werth, “Alberta Association of Covenanting Congregations,” April 2008. In 2004, chair Geoff Wilkins estimated that “about half” of the NACC member congregations “might consider themselves *committed* to the NACC.” Wilkins, “NACC Chairman’s Report, 2004,” 2. All documents in Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.

<sup>17</sup>The NACC also sends out a two-page e-mail bulletin to 123 individual and congregational e-mail addresses, which may reach over 5,000 people if they are being reproduced in church bulletins (Wilkins, e-mail to author, November 4, 2010), but the same caveats apply here.

<sup>18</sup>The figure is from Canada Post Publications Mail, Statement of Mailing, September 29, 2009, in the records of the Fellowship Publications office in Barrie, Ontario [hereafter RFP]. All member households of NACC congregations were added to the *Fellowship Magazine* mailing list in the 1990s; those who do not write or donate are removed after a year. *Fellowship Magazine* circulation figures, therefore, already include a rough indication of those members of NACC churches who can be regarded as being individually active in the renewal movement. Galbraith interview.<sup>16</sup>“Words of Welcome,” *Small Voice*, Winter 1968, 1.

<sup>19</sup>Figures from “Concern Mailing,” (2010), document from David Dawson in possession of author, and Norm Hockridge (Church Alive treasurer), e-mail to author, July 26, 2010, respectively.

<sup>20</sup>Dawson interview; Hockridge, telephone conversation with author, October 14, 2010.

<sup>21</sup>Dawson interview.

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this figure represents an estimate of the total number of individuals who regularly and actively demonstrate support for the movement.

Using different assumptions about the amount of overlap between the three groups and the number of supporters per subscribing household, it is possible to set approximate upper and lower limits of 14,200 and 4,800 for the total number of individual supporters (see appendix 1), although something closer to the 7,400 figure is far more likely.

The most recent year for which denominational figures are available is 2008. Using the same procedures to produce upper, middle, and lower estimates of renewal movement support in 2008 compares to denominational membership and attendance as shown in table 1. The 2008 estimates are noticeably higher than the current estimates, largely because of a large recent decline in the number of people receiving *Fellowship Magazine*, but since the number of members and attendees for the denomination as a whole has also been declining rapidly, this may not have affected the percentages represented by renewal movement supporters.

**Table 1. Renewal movement supporters as percentage of United Church supporters**

Renewal movement supporters estimates (2008)	Percentage of United Church membership (2008) (N = 525,673)	Percentage of United Church attendance (2008) (N = 193,512)
17,400 (upper limit)	3.3	9.0
9,500 (most likely)	1.8	4.9
6,400 (lower limit)	1.2	3.3

Sources: Calculations for renewal movement supporters in Appendix 1; denominational data from United Church *Yearbook* (2009).

The following analysis works with attendance rather than membership figures, on the assumption that the former represent United Church people who are active in the denomination, and are therefore more relevant to determining the potential constituency of the renewal movement. Individual renewal movement supporters, therefore, probably amount to roughly 5 percent of the average Sunday attendance of the denomination.

Does this 5 percent represent the bulk of Evangelicals/conservatives in the United Church? Or are there many such people in the denomination who are not renewal movement supporters? Fortunately, recent survey research on evangelicalism in Canada has provided estimates of the number of “evangelically aligned” people in the United Church.<sup>22</sup> According to the 1996 “God and Society” survey conducted by Angus Reid, 10 percent of respondents who identified themselves as affiliated with the United Church qualified as “evangelically aligned.” Another large survey, conducted in 2003 by Ipsos Reid, found that 21 percent of those affiliated with the United Church were evangelically aligned.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> These surveys used something called the Christian Evangelical Scale (CES), a set of questions with an accompanying weighting of answers, to find evangelically aligned Christians in Canada. The CES was developed by historian George Rawlyk and pollster Andrew Grenville. Rick Hiemstra, “Evangelical Alignment in Canada,” *Church & Faith Trends* 1 no. 3 (July 2008), 1. The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism prefers that the term “evangelically aligned” (rather than “evangelical”) be used for those identified by the CES, because the scale identifies people who believe and do things characteristic of Evangelicals, without making judgments about their actual faith orientation. This distinction is observed in this paper.

<sup>23</sup> Data are from the 1996 God and Society survey and the 2003 Evangelical Beliefs and Practices survey, courtesy of Rick Hiemstra.

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Most of the difference between the 1996 and 2003 numbers can probably be explained by the fact that the two surveys used different questions about biblical authority. The question asked in 1996 was much stricter, asking respondents whether they agreed with the statement “I feel the Bible is God’s word, and is to be taken literally, word for word,” while the 2003 equivalent was “I believe the Bible to be the word of God, and is reliable and trustworthy.” The 1996 question is problematic, since even those with a high view of Scriptural authority, including those who believe in biblical inerrancy, might have trouble with the word “literally,” given the use of poetic and symbolic language in many parts of the Bible.<sup>24</sup> This point likely also applies to the renewal groups, so the 2003 number of 21 percent probably provides a more accurate estimate of the potential constituency of the renewal groups in the United Church.

Furthermore, it is significant that regular church attendance was one of the criteria used in both surveys to determine whether respondents were evangelically aligned. People listed as United Church affiliated in the surveys included many people who attended church rarely if at all; for example, in the 2003 survey, close to three-quarters of United Church respondents attended church less than once a month. Among evangelically aligned United Church respondents, however, this number was reversed: close to three-quarters of evangelically aligned United Church respondents attended church once a month or more. Thus, evangelically aligned individuals make up a larger percentage of United Church *attendees* than of United Church *affiliates*. Using data from the 2003 Ipsos Reid survey, it is possible to estimate that a remarkable 46 percent of people attending the United Church on an average Sunday that year were evangelically aligned. (For the calculations behind this estimate, see appendix 2). This estimate seems to fit the general sense of most of those interviewed for this article that a substantial proportion of the church’s membership shares the basic theological position of the renewal movement.<sup>25</sup>

By dividing our best estimate of active renewal supporters in the United Church (5 percent of average attendance) by the evangelically aligned proportion of the United Church (46 percent of average attendance, assuming no significant change from 2003), we can therefore estimate that about one in nine, or 11 percent, of active evangelically aligned United Church people are also active supporters of the United Church renewal movement. Using again the lower and upper limits established earlier, a minimum of one in fourteen (7 percent) and a maximum of one in five (20 percent) of active evangelically aligned United Church people are part of the renewal movement. In any case, it seems clear that most people in the United Church with evangelical convictions are not part of the renewal movement. Put differently, the renewal groups have mobilized only a minority of the people in the United Church who agree with their basic theological outlook.<sup>26</sup>

In summary, then, the renewal movement in the United Church has an estimated 7,400 supporters, who probably make up about 5 percent of the United Church’s average weekly attendance. The proportion could in reality be as high as 9 per cent, or as low as 3 per cent, though a number closer to 5 percent is more likely. This suggests that only a minority, about one in eight if we take the middle estimate, of evangelically aligned United Church attendees are part of the renewal movement. Thus, while the renewal movement has succeeded in providing a spiritual home within the United Church for a significant minority of the denomination’s evangelically aligned

<sup>24</sup>This point is recognized, for example, by “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21 no. 4 (December 1978).

<sup>25</sup>This point was made, for example, by Boughner, C. Burton, Dawson, Walker, and Wilkins in their interviews with the author.

<sup>26</sup>The figures given here may actually understate this point somewhat, since some renewal group supporters would describe themselves as “conservative” but not necessarily “evangelical,” and might not respond as positively to the questions about conversion and evangelism that were used in the 1996 and 2003 surveys.



people – an accomplishment that should not be minimized – it has not succeeded in doing so for most of them. The renewal movement is therefore a double minority: a minority of United Church people, and a minority of evangelically aligned United Church attendees.

Two questions arise from this conclusion. First, why has the renewal movement been able to recruit and retain these 7,400 supporters; in other words, why is it as big as it is? Second, why isn't the movement bigger? In particular, why are so many evangelically aligned United Church people not part of the renewal movement? The next two sections seek to answer these questions.

## Factors and Strategies of Growth and Retention

The success of small, badly-funded, largely volunteer-run groups in building a movement that today probably has 7,400 active supporters – and may, at its peak in the late 1980s, have had as many as 55,000 – requires some explanation.<sup>27</sup> The reasons behind this success, it appears, fall into two categories.

On the one hand, there were general factors at work in the denomination, outside the control of the renewal groups themselves, that made this movement possible. First, the United Church has always had a substantial evangelical constituency, inherited initially from its predecessor denominations, which had been the major Canadian evangelical denominations of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> This evangelical heritage was passed on for decades in the piety of United Church laypeople, and to some extent nurtured and encouraged by the broadly evangelical character of many church programs before the 1960s.<sup>29</sup> Over the years, many of these Evangelicals have left the United Church for more unambiguously evangelical denominations, particularly since the reshaping of the church's mission and programs along liberal lines in the 1960s. But a significant group of Evangelicals has remained in the church, so that in recent years (as we have seen) about one-fifth of United Church affiliated people, and about two-fifths of United Church attendees, have beliefs and practices that distinguish them as evangelically aligned. This has provided a major base of potential support for the renewal movement.

Second, the continual movement of the denomination in a liberal direction has tended to "activate" this evangelical and conservative constituency in the church. The further the church as a whole moves into liberalism, the more likely it is that (a) remaining Evangelicals in the church will become aware of themselves as a distinct group at odds with the denomination, and (b) they will be inclined to take some sort of action against liberalization. Both effects, other things being equal, will tend to benefit the renewal movement (although other things are not equal, insofar as liberalization also leads to the exodus of evangelical members – more on this below). The phenomenon of liberalization leading to activation of conservatives can be clearly seen in the history of the movement. Many of the current leaders of the renewal groups got involved because a particular aspect of liberalization – whether the ordination of practising homosexuals, denial of the deity of Christ by leaders, or the like – alerted them

<sup>27</sup>The 55,000 figure comes from combining John Trueman's estimate of 40,000 to 50,000 COC supporters with membership totals for the other groups in the same period. See the companion article in this issue for details.

<sup>28</sup>The Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) also joined the United Church in 1968, and although they were a relatively small group, they did bring a new infusion of evangelical members into the United Church. Pelham Community Church in the Niagara region, whose pastor is Diane Walker, is an example of a former EUB congregation which has maintained an evangelical outlook within the United Church. Calvary United Church in St. Jacobs, Ontario, has a similar story. Both were members of the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations before its dissolution (under way at the time of writing).

<sup>29</sup>Kevin Flatt, "The Survival and Decline of the Evangelical Identity of the United Church of Canada, 1930–1971," (Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, 2008).

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to the movement of the denomination and their own opposition to it.<sup>30</sup> Lockhart points out that it was easy to build support for the movement in the late 1980s when conservatives were up in arms about homosexual ordination.<sup>31</sup> Every time the United Church moves further in this direction, more conservatives are activated in this way as they find themselves left behind. As Diane Walker, senior editor of *Fellowship Magazine* and pastor of a thriving church in Niagara Region, says, "In the United Church you can move to the right just by standing still.... I joke that I went to bed a moderate United Church person and woke up a raving fundamentalist."<sup>32</sup>

These external factors have contributed to the successes of the renewal groups in recruiting supporters, but so have the strategies adopted by the groups. Each of the groups, with the exception of the NACC, has produced a multi-page regular publication aimed not only at supporters, but also potential supporters. To try to increase circulation, for example, for a time *Fellowship Magazine* encouraged subscribers to sign up all members of their congregations (as found in church directories) to receive the magazine. This program proved largely ineffective, however, and raised potential privacy concerns, so it was dropped.<sup>33</sup> In the late 1990s the Community of Concern tried the same approach with its publication, *Concern*, with similarly disappointing results.<sup>34</sup> Another strategy used by *Fellowship Magazine* beginning in 1997 was adding all ministry personnel listed in the United Church yearbook to its mailing list (removing those who asked to be removed and adding any new names annually). This strategy was more effective, and today nearly three-quarters of *Fellowship Magazine* subscribers are ministry personnel listed in the yearbook, though only 8 percent of these are donors, compared with 27 percent of all subscribers.<sup>35</sup> At various times, the renewal groups have also promoted themselves through mailings to congregations, displays at church court meetings, public rallies, essay contests for theological students, and even protest marches.<sup>36</sup> For the most part, however, these strategies have produced meagre results as far as recruitment is concerned.

Far and away the most effective method of recruitment for the renewal groups has been personal contact. Examples abound. Many of the original member congregations of the NACC joined as a result of the personal connections made by Bob Blackburn (at that time secretary of an NACC planning committee formed by representatives of the other groups) during a road trip across the country.<sup>37</sup> Scott Boughner, a minister, became involved with Fellowship Publications after getting to know Gwen Galbraith, the Fellowship Publications office administrator, through his membership in an informal local group of evangelical ministers.<sup>38</sup> A number of current or former members of the movement, including Galbraith and John Howard (formerly a United Church minister, now a counsellor), joined the movement because of their contact with Lloyd Cumming, an early UCRF leader and a member of their congregation in Barrie.<sup>39</sup> David Dawson, vice president of the COC, got involved in the organization because a member of his local congregation told him about it.<sup>40</sup> Lockhart joined the COC because of a phone call from another minister, Bill Fritz.<sup>41</sup> Walker was personally asked to consider becoming senior editor of

<sup>30</sup>Wilkins and Lockhart, for example, fall into this category. Interviews with author.

<sup>31</sup>Lockhart interview.

<sup>32</sup>Walker interview.

<sup>33</sup>Galbraith interview.

<sup>34</sup>Dawson interview.

<sup>35</sup>Data from the *Fellowship Magazine* database provided to the author by Gwen Galbraith.

<sup>36</sup>J. Trueman interview; Graham Scott (former editor of *Theological Digest and Outlook*), interview with author, July 20, 2010; Walker interview; Wilkins interview.

<sup>37</sup>Bob Blackburn, "Proposal by Telephone," undated document from Blackburn in possession of author, 2.

<sup>38</sup>Boughner interview.

<sup>39</sup>Galbraith interview; John Howard (former pastor at Collier St. United in Barrie), interview with author, July 6, 2010.

<sup>40</sup>Dawson interview.

<sup>41</sup>Lockhart interview.





*Fellowship Magazine* by Gail Reid, the outgoing editor.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, every one of the current or former members of the movement interviewed for this article (and who commented on the issue) was recruited through a personal contact. In some cases, the person in question had not even heard of the renewal movement before being personally invited to join it. Personal contact is also important in retaining the movement's current supporters. The COC in particular maintains a nationwide staff of 24 volunteers who stay in touch with supporters by correspondence and telephone.<sup>43</sup> Dawson credits this network with keeping the COC's donor base the strongest of those of the renewal groups.<sup>44</sup> Boughner is surely right when he identifies personal networking as one of the main strengths of the movement.<sup>45</sup>

## Obstacles to Growth and Forces of Decline

There is no doubt that the renewal groups have been able to mobilize a significant number of evangelical or conservative people in the United Church. Two major questions remain, however. First, why has the movement been able to mobilize only a fairly small minority of this potential constituency? Second, why has the movement been shrinking in recent years?

There are, it appears, two main types of factors that have prevented the renewal groups from recruiting more of their potential supporters: (1) structural obstacles having to do with the nature of the groups and the denomination generally, and (2) characteristics of the potential constituency itself that discourage recruitment.

There are a range of structural obstacles that have faced the renewal movement over the years and now. First, and perhaps most serious, is the difficulty of communicating the existence, purposes, and activities of the renewal groups to potential supporters. A common lament of current leaders is that many United Church people still have never heard of the renewal groups. Geoff Wilkins, chair of the NACC (now in the process of shutting down), still regularly hears from United Church people who thought they were alone in their evangelical/conservative views and then somehow found out about the renewal movement.<sup>46</sup> Galbraith similarly receives letters from United Church members who are excited to have heard about the renewal movement by somehow stumbling across a copy of *Fellowship Magazine*.<sup>47</sup>

Communicating with those who would react the same way, but who have never heard of the movement, is a constant challenge for the groups. The groups cannot afford radio and television ads, which in any event would be very difficult to target to United Church people.<sup>48</sup> Bulk distributions of their publications to all United Church members would be prohibitively expensive, even if it were somehow possible to get mailing addresses for all of them, and smaller-scale experiments in such mailings have not been effective in the past (as discussed above). Bulk mailings to congregations face a different kind of problem: hostile or indifferent gatekeepers. Mail to congregations usually has to go through the minister first, and most ministers are theologically at odds with the renewal movement (for reasons described below). Those who are indifferent or mildly supportive tend

<sup>42</sup>Walker interview.

<sup>43</sup>D. Trueman interview; Dawson interview.

<sup>44</sup>Dawson interview.

<sup>45</sup>Boughner interview.

<sup>46</sup>Wilkins interview.

<sup>47</sup>Galbraith interview.

<sup>48</sup>Dawson says that even the COC, with its relatively healthy financial position, lacks the resources for this kind of advertising. Dawson interview.

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to be busy and receive a great deal of mail as it is. Either way, the renewal movement material ends up in the wastebasket.<sup>49</sup> When the NACC sent out a mass mailing to all 400 or so British Columbia congregations about the Bill Phipps controversy in 1997, Wilkins relates, all but one of the responses he received were phone calls from hostile or dismissive clergy or board chairs who told him they were going to throw the letters out.<sup>50</sup> In short, little of anything mailed to congregations en masse ever reaches the average church member, and this is especially true of renewal movement mailings.

There are several reasons why United Church ministers tend to be theologically liberal. Probably most significant is their training. Nearly all United Church ministers are trained in liberal United Church educational institutions. It is difficult for those trained entirely outside the denomination, including those trained in other countries, to be ordained. Michael Blair, who works at the United Church head office in Toronto as executive minister of communities in mission, points out that the church currently has no agreements with other denominations for mutual recognition of ordination.<sup>51</sup> Even transferring credentials from a closely related denomination, like some Methodist bodies in other countries, is a lengthy and complicated process.

Potential ministers of conservative views, therefore, have to overcome several obstacles to serve in the United Church. First, they have to make it through several years of liberal theological training while maintaining their own convictions.<sup>52</sup> If they manage to do this, and then manage to get ordained, they still face the difficult search for a conservative congregation in a largely liberal denomination.<sup>53</sup> Once they have found a congregation, many then struggle with feelings of isolation from their colleagues.<sup>54</sup> Many also have a sense of intimidation related to their often unpopular views – Boughner uses the term “sense of oppression.”<sup>55</sup> Because of this, the NACC deliberately chose to have only lay people serve in the position of chair, after minister Ted Wigglesworth was removed from his pastorate while serving in that position.<sup>56</sup> The COC has been unable to find a president for years, because, according to Dawson, ministers “feel vulnerable” and no layperson has stepped forward to take up the role.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, according to several ministers interviewed, conservative ministers sometimes face unspoken limits to advancement, although some of those involved in the renewal movement have served in positions of responsibility at the presbytery and conference levels.<sup>58</sup> Thus, it is difficult for conservatives to become established ministers in the United Church, and for those who manage to do it, there are strong incentives to leave the denomination for greener pastures.

<sup>49</sup>Dawson interview.

<sup>50</sup>Wilkins interview.

<sup>51</sup>Michael Blair, interview with author, September 23, 2010.

<sup>52</sup>Younger ministers (relative to the movement and the United Church ministry generally) make this point quite emphatically. Boughner, who is in his fifties, believes the training of ministers is in the hands of those who hold a “secular humanist” perspective (Boughner interview). According to Mark Fearnall, a conservative fortysomething minister in Campbellville, Ontario, who is not formally involved in the renewal movement, the training he experienced at Emmanuel College in the 1980s was “very, very liberal.” Mark Fearnall, telephone interview with author, August 17, 2010. These observations, of course, are in keeping with the history of theological education in the denomination and its predecessors since the late nineteenth century.

<sup>53</sup>Boughner interview.

<sup>54</sup>Younger ministers, again, particularly stress this point. Boughner and Fearnall interviews.

<sup>55</sup>Boughner interview.

<sup>56</sup>Bob Blackburn, interview with author, August 3, 2010.

<sup>57</sup>Dawson interview.

<sup>58</sup>Blair acknowledges that evangelical ministers tend to be overlooked for positions of leadership, although he thinks there should be more space for evangelical voices in the denomination. Blair interview. In their interviews, J. Burton, Boughner, and Wilkins (for example) referred to various difficulties and frustrations they have faced in trying to participate in the church courts. This has not prevented some renewal movement clergy from serving in positions of responsibility at various times, such as Bill Fritz (a founding figure of the COC) and Frank Lockhart. Howard and Lockhart interviews.

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The general dearth of conservative ministers in the United Church is a significant problem for the renewal movement in a number of ways. For one thing, it is difficult for individual conservative laypeople to grow in their conservative beliefs and/or remain in the United Church when their congregation has a liberal minister. It also means that the gatekeepers of information in local congregations are unsympathetic to the movement. The lack of conservative ministers poses particular problems for conservative congregations, which can run into difficulty when a minister retires or moves on and has to be replaced.<sup>59</sup> This problem has bedeviled the NACC, with its congregation-based membership; over the years, many congregations have withdrawn from the organization on the advice of their ministers, often after a change of leadership.<sup>60</sup> Even some former bastions of the renewal movement, such as Collier Street United in Barrie and Streetsville United in Mississauga, have withdrawn from the NACC or moved in a more liberal direction under the leadership of new ministers.<sup>61</sup> Overall then, the lack of conservative ministers tends to limit both the size of the renewal movement's potential constituency and its ability to reach that constituency.

In addition to these ongoing structural obstacles that make it difficult for the renewal movement to mobilize conservatives in the church, some obstacles are a result of the characteristics of this segment of the church. To begin with, in the absence of major controversies, some conservatives are simply unaware of the extent to which liberalization has progressed at a denominational level – after all, not all United Church members read the *United Church Observer*, peruse study documents from head office, or follow the news from General Council meetings.<sup>62</sup> Others lack theological equipping. Boughner and Galbraith both think that average United Church members, including those whose views align with the renewal movement, tend to have low biblical literacy and lack understanding of United Church doctrine and polity.<sup>63</sup> At times, the renewal groups have also acquired a negative image in the eyes of some United Church conservatives, as rebellious or disloyal to the denomination, or as a spent force associated with past battles, for example.<sup>64</sup> In some cases, ministers of conservative views are reluctant to join the renewal groups because they do not want to be associated with this negative image, or because they are concerned about the repercussions for their careers.<sup>65</sup>

More generally, and perhaps most significantly, nearly all interviewees noted that evangelical or conservative people in the United Church, like church members generally, tend to focus on their own congregation and give little thought to denominational issues. Walker somewhat apologetically admits that as a pastor she is excited that her relatively young congregation is taking up roles of responsibility in their own church, and she does not want to see that energy diverted into fighting battles at higher levels.<sup>66</sup> As both Dawson and Walker point out, in this age of nondenominational churches, some evangelical United Church congregations hardly even think of themselves as belonging to a denomination.<sup>67</sup> Boughner notes, for example, that his last congregation was

<sup>59</sup>Walker's church, Pelham Community Church, has identified this as a potential problem and has discussed a succession plan in response. Walker interview.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Minutes, NACC annual meeting, April 21, 1994, 3; W. Alan Dowber, "COACC Report to the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations AGM," Annual General Meeting Minutes binder, RNACC.

<sup>61</sup> Galbraith interview; Verna Blackburn, interview with author, August 3, 2010.

<sup>62</sup>Wilkins interview; Galbraith interview.

<sup>63</sup>Galbraith interview; Boughner interview. Wilkins makes a similar point about many of the congregations who joined the NACC out of their opposition to homosexual ordination in the early 1990s.

<sup>64</sup>B. Blackburn interview; Boughner interview; J. Burton interview.

<sup>65</sup>Boughner says he did not formally join the renewal movement sooner because "I would immediately be labeled as somebody who is too orthodox, too traditional ... to continue my career in the church. So I was very afraid of identifying myself as an orthodox pastor for fear of lack of career choices." Boughner interview.

<sup>66</sup>Walker interview.

<sup>67</sup>Dawson interview; Walker interview.

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simply not interested in news from conference or presbytery.<sup>68</sup> This is not simply a question of laypeople being congregationally focused, however. Ministers also tend to focus on their own congregations, either because involvement in denominational politics is exhausting and intimidating, or because they think it is futile.<sup>69</sup> Wilkins calls this a “foxhole mentality” – the belief that they can stay out of trouble and do more good by keeping their heads down and focusing on the local church.<sup>70</sup>

One other point is important in explaining the disconnect between the renewal movement and the bulk of evangelically aligned United Church people: the failure of the movement to make inroads into ethnic minority communities in the church. Out of the roughly 120 congregations that have at some time been part of the NACC, only two, Chinese United in Winnipeg and Chinese United in Ottawa, have been predominantly made up of members of ethnic minority groups, despite that fact that there are over 50 such congregations in the United Church.<sup>71</sup> Yet these kinds of churches, according to Michael Blair, whose position includes special responsibility for such congregations, tend to be significantly more theologically and morally conservative than the average United Church congregation.<sup>72</sup> Korean-Canadian churches, for example, import their ministers from Korea (despite the lengthy process of having their credentials transferred or having them ordained in Canada) because they regard even Korean-Canadians trained in United Church institutions as “theologically suspect.” In fact, were it not for the fact that the denomination owns their property, many of these churches would leave the United Church, according to Blair. At the same time these churches tend not to be suffering as badly from numerical decline as the average United Church, but they do have a problem with losing their second generation, some of whom have found their way into evangelical churches from other denominations. In short, ethnic minority communities are in several respects a potentially rich recruiting ground for the renewal movement.

The features of isolation and congregational focus typical of conservatives in the United Church, however, are especially pronounced in ethnic minority churches. Language barriers are the main reason for this.<sup>73</sup> Ministers and congregants of these churches are less likely to be fluent in English, and therefore even less likely to be aware of the existence of the renewal groups or their publications. Wilkins agrees that this barrier posed a problem for the NACC, which was aware of the existence of these congregations and their likely sympathy with the basic position of the renewal groups.<sup>74</sup> As well, many of the other obstacles to recruitment described above also apply to members of ethnic minority communities in the United Church.<sup>75</sup> All in all, these barriers have largely prevented this group of potential supporters from becoming an active part of the renewal movement constituency.

Taken together, these structural obstacles and limiting characteristics help explain why only a minority of United

<sup>68</sup>Boughner interview.

<sup>69</sup>This point was picked up by Mike Milne, “Mellowing of the Right,” *United Church Observer*, June 2007, 22–3; see, for example, the comments by ministers Bob Ripley and Shawn Ketcheson. Ketcheson has since left the United Church; Walker, e-mail to author, November 2, 2010.

<sup>70</sup>Wilkins interview.

<sup>71</sup>This conclusion is based on my reconstruction of a list of all NACC member congregations over the last two decades, from a wide range of RNACC documents, including minutes of annual general meetings and lists of member congregations in NACC pamphlets.

<sup>72</sup>Blair interview.

<sup>73</sup>Blair interview.

<sup>74</sup>Wilkins interview.

<sup>75</sup>Wilkins notes, for example, that younger members of one Chinese-Canadian church expressed interest in the NACC but ultimately decided not to join because their elders “were anxious not to rock the boat” and they wanted to avoid division in the congregation. E-mail to author, Nov. 4, 2010.

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Church conservatives have joined the renewal movement. But the renewal movement faces another major problem, which can be called the shrinking constituency problem. In brief, the number of people in the United Church who are theologically in harmony with the renewal groups has been shrinking in both absolute and relative terms. On the one hand, the United Church as a whole is shrinking rapidly, having lost about 158,000 members and 92,000 attendees between 1998 and 2008 – an average loss of 2.6 percent of members and 3.8 percent of attendees per year.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, even as a percentage of that shrinking total, it is likely that the relative number of conservatives in the United Church has been decreasing over the past several decades. There is ample evidence that since the formation of the UCRF in the 1960s, there has been a steady trickle of Evangelicals out of the United Church, at times growing to a flood, as during the aftermath of the controversy over homosexual ordination in the late 1980s.<sup>77</sup> This exodus has probably slowed in recent years. Data from the 1996 and 2003 surveys mentioned earlier permit comparisons if one limits the measurement of evangelical alignment to the relevant six questions asked by both surveys. Using this truncated measure of evangelical alignment in the United Church, these surveys show only a slight decline from 18.5 percent of respondents in 1996 to 17 percent of respondents in 2003.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, the trend continues to be down, and in combination with the shrinking of the denomination as a whole, it creates a constantly descending “ceiling” of potential support for the renewal groups.

As an aside, it is also likely that this shrinking constituency is becoming more dilute as it shrinks, because those Evangelicals or conservatives who are more aware of their position and firm in their beliefs will, other things being equal, tend to be the most likely to leave the denomination as it liberalizes. Of course, one must hasten to add, many of those who have remained in the United Church (usually because of the renewal movement) are firm in their beliefs and aware of their position relative to the denomination. They have remained in the United Church only after careful thought, much prayer, and often many tears. Nevertheless, as a general principle, there is reason to believe that the more evangelical or conservative one is, and the more aware one is of one’s own identity as a conservative in a liberal church, the more likely one is to become fed up with the United Church and leave the denomination. Specifically, much of the remaining hard core of conservative and evangelical conviction in the United Church left in the aftermath of the homosexuality controversy in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>79</sup>

With a shrinking pool of potential recruits, a host of structural obstacles to recruitment, and a growing number of reasons why the potential recruits have little interest in denominational renewal, it is little wonder that the renewal groups have struggled to find their next generation of leaders and supporters. Without a significant influx of new members, the renewal movement is aging. Boughner notes that, at age 56, he is on the “younger edge” of the movement.<sup>80</sup> Many leaders or former leaders have served for years past retirement age; Wilkins, now in his seventies, will be the last NACC chair, and Blackburn, at various times active in the COC, the NACC, the UCRF, and Fellowship Publications, did not step down from leadership roles until he was nearly 80.<sup>81</sup> (Now in his

<sup>76</sup>United Church *Yearbook* (2009).

<sup>77</sup> See the analysis in the companion article in this issue.

<sup>78</sup>The 2003 number given here differs from the figure of 21 percent given earlier in the article because two of the eight questions used in 2003 have been left out of this calculation to permit direct comparisons with the 1996 data. As a spot measurement, the 21 percent figure is to be preferred because of its more thorough rubric for measuring evangelical alignment. Data supplied by Rick Hiemstra.

<sup>79</sup>Walker interview. See also the companion article in this issue.

<sup>80</sup>Boughner interview.

<sup>81</sup>Wilkins interview; Blackburn interview.



early nineties, he continues to take an active interest in the movement.) The ordinary members are getting older as well. Galbraith notes that she periodically receives letters from elderly subscribers to *Fellowship Magazine*, many of them former UCRF members, who are regretfully ending their subscriptions because their failing eyesight does not permit them to read the magazine anymore.<sup>82</sup> The same point could be made about the United Church as a whole, which faces an aging ministry and membership (most of the churches in Niagara Presbytery, says Walker, are having difficulty maintaining Sunday schools).<sup>83</sup> Without the financial and other resources of a major denomination, however, the renewal movement cannot survive such a trend for long.

## Looking Forward: Concluding Observations

Predicting the future is a risky venture for anyone, perhaps especially for historians, who are used to looking backwards rather than forwards. Before concluding this article, however, I will take the risk of making some tentative observations about the situation facing the renewal movement in the second decade of the third millennium.

The following are key points moving forward. Each one deals with one of the major factors of growth or decline that has historically been important in shaping the fortunes of the renewal movement.

- **Liberalization of the denomination.** There is no evidence that the United Church is changing its overall liberal trajectory. Possibly, as the educational and administrative apparatus experiences increasing financial difficulties, there may be a reconsideration of the current path of the church, or at least more openness to non-liberal approaches. This could make it easier for the renewal groups to carry out their pastoral task. A rejection of liberalism is unlikely, however, after a century or more of the dominance of liberal theology and five decades of a public liberal ethos for the denomination. As we have seen, although many active United Church people are evangelically aligned, the majority are not.
- **Shrinking potential constituency for renewal groups.** This is also unlikely to change due to the continuing shrinkage of the United Church and the continuing trickle of Evangelicals out of the denomination. The latter may slow to a standstill if liberalization comes to a halt, but on the other hand, such a change would reduce one of the main motivations for conservatives to join a renewal group.
- **Obstacles to recruitment of potential constituency.** If the current trend toward focusing on the local congregations and away from denominationalism continues, this problem will probably get worse. Given that it is younger leaders who voice this point most strongly, an improvement here is unlikely. The Internet is no solution to the problem of communication; there has been no major improvement in recruitment over the past fifteen years.
- **Obstacles to evangelical ministers.** This is one area where there might be change favourable to the renewal movement. The United Church is facing a severe shortage of ministers. Dawson points out that the majority of churches in Hamilton Presbytery lack full-time ministers, and the problem is likely to get worse; Blair notes that four out of the eleven United Church theological colleges have recently had their funding discontinued.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup>Galbraith interview.

<sup>83</sup>Walker interview.

<sup>84</sup>Dawson interview; Blair interview.



Consequently, the United Church may be forced to take a more flexible approach to educational requirements and ordination of ministers (something Blair is open to). If aspiring evangelical candidates for the ministry in the United Church could be trained in institutions more suited to their theological convictions, and then be ordained in the United Church, this could make it easier for conservative congregations to find suitable ministers. The ability to have ministers from other denominations transfer their credentials more easily to the United Church could have a similar effect. And in the long run, having more evangelical ministers in the United Church would be good for achieving the goals of the renewal movement, whether or not it would boost the movement itself.

Thus, the overall climate will continue to be strongly unfavourable to the renewal movement, though the United Church's state of crisis may create opportunities for some successes, particularly if it creates more room for evangelical ministers in the denomination.

The question remains, however, whether the renewal groups can survive long enough to benefit from any opportunities that arise. The NACC has already voted to dissolve itself and merge its assets into Fellowship Publications.<sup>85</sup> The other three groups face falling membership numbers and/or subscriptions. Fellowship Publications has already reduced the number of annual issues of *Fellowship Magazine* from five to one, and even that is probably not financially sustainable.<sup>86</sup> The recent issue (September 2010) of *Theological Digest and Outlook*, the publication of which appears to be the main function of Church Alive, will probably be the last.<sup>87</sup> Even the Community of Concern, which is probably in the best financial position of the extant organizations, has lost 40 percent of its donor base since the mid-1990s.<sup>88</sup>

The NACC and Fellowship Publications have put their last best hope in bringing together young evangelical and conservative leaders to see what they can make of the movement – a risky move given that these leaders have so far avoided formal involvement in the movement. The *Cruxifusion* magazine issue recently published by Fellowship Publications, highlighting the ideas of such leaders, is one element of this approach, as is a conference of fifty younger leaders scheduled to meet in April 2011.<sup>89</sup> At the time of writing, Church Alive and the COC are holding back from a similar commitment, although they both contributed some of the financial support for the *Cruxifusion* issue.<sup>90</sup> It is too early to tell what, if anything, will come of these ventures, although it is likely that the renewal movement will continue to survive in some form as long as there are several thousand people to support it. If the articles in *Cruxifusion* are any indication, it does seem that some of these new leaders are interested in carrying forward the concerns of the existing groups – though perhaps less concerned with the direction or survival of the denomination as a whole.<sup>91</sup>

If these efforts falter, and the renewal movement disappears as an organized force in the United Church over the next few years, will it have failed? On the one hand, for a poorly funded volunteer movement, it has gone far in achieving its pastoral goals. Although the majority of evangelically aligned United Church people are not

<sup>85</sup>NACC press release, May 8, 2010, [http://www.unitedrenewal.org/archives/2010/05/press\\_release\\_n.php](http://www.unitedrenewal.org/archives/2010/05/press_release_n.php).

<sup>86</sup>Galbraith interview; Walker interview.

<sup>87</sup>Scott interview.

<sup>88</sup>Dawson interview.

<sup>89</sup>Walker interview; Wilkins interview; Galbraith interview.

<sup>90</sup>Lockhart interview; Dawson interview; Gwen Galbraith, telephone conversation with author, November 9, 2010.

<sup>91</sup>*Cruxifusion: A Special Issue of Fellowship Publications* (September 2010), [http://cruxifusion.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Final\\_cruxifusionreduced.pdf](http://cruxifusion.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Final_cruxifusionreduced.pdf).

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part of the movement, it is clear that it has made a difference to its members as a source of encouragement and place to be heard. On the other hand, it has not succeeded in achieving its overall political goal of changing the direction of the denomination as a whole, something that has been central to various parts and phases of the movement. Helga Schimmel, formerly the UCRF office administrator and now a member of Bethel Community Church in Barrie, notes that the prospects for success in this respect were always slim. On the other hand, she adds, "Like the prophets of old, someone has to call the people to repentance."<sup>92</sup>

The biggest challenge to the continued survival of the renewal movement, however, will not come from any of the factors discussed above; it will come from the rapid decline of the United Church. Since peaking in the 1960s, the denomination has lost half of its members and 90 percent of its Sunday school enrollment.<sup>93</sup> Aside from a small and short-lived plateau for a few years in the early 1980s, the decline in all measures of support has been relentless. If the relatively linear trends of the last two decades are projected forward, it appears that Sunday school enrollment will hit zero about ten years from now, with attendance at Sunday worship drying up about ten years after that. Of course, a startling and sustained reversal is possible, but there are no signs on the horizon to make it seem even remotely likely. Perhaps congregations could obtain title to their properties, which might make it simpler for evangelical congregations to maintain their ministries regardless of the state of the denomination.<sup>94</sup> The death of a major denomination through attrition would be an unprecedented historical event, so it is not clear what the final stages would look like. But at that time, the question facing Evangelicals and other conservatives who remain committed to the United Church will no longer be how to survive in their denomination, but how to survive and thrive after its collapse.✚

<sup>92</sup>Schimmel interview.

<sup>93</sup>United Church *Yearbook* (2009).

<sup>94</sup>Walker makes this point. E-mail to author, November 2, 2010.



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## Appendix 1. Estimation of Total Number of Renewal Movement Supporters

At present, these are the most recent available data from the three renewal groups with individual-based membership and/or subscriptions:

**Table A1-1.** Current renewal movement statistics

Group	Item	Number
Fellowship Publications	Copies mailed per issue, <i>Fellowship Magazine</i> , 2009	3,871
Community of Concern	Copies mailed per issue, <i>Concern</i> , 2010	2,849
Church Alive	Copies mailed per issue, <i>Theological Digest and Outlook</i> , 2010	361

Sources: Canada Post Publications Mail, Statement of Mailing, September 29, 2009, RFP; "Concern Mailing," (2010), document from David Dawson in possession of author; Norm Hockridge (Church Alive treasurer), e-mail to author, July 26, 2010.

Both Church Alive and the Community of Concern have mailing lists made up almost exclusively of their supporters, so the circulation data of their publications can be taken as a fairly good proxy for the number of their supporting households. Fellowship Publications does not have membership distinct from the *Fellowship Magazine* mailing list. Because members of NACC congregations were at one time added to the Fellowship Magazine mailing list, and are still on the list if they have written or donated at least once a year, the *Fellowship Magazine* number can be taken as including a rough estimate of the number of members of NACC congregations who are active supporters of the renewal movement.

Simply summing these numbers does not produce a realistic estimate of the total number of supporters of the renewal movement, however, because (a) there is significant overlap between the supporters of the three groups, and (b) many of the households that receive the publications have more than one individual supporter (e.g., a married couple).

These following estimates are based on educated guesswork, taking into account what is known about the three publications and their respective supporters:

- About two-thirds of those who receive *Concern* also get *Fellowship Magazine*.<sup>95</sup>
- About two-thirds of *Theological Digest and Outlook* subscribers get one of the other two publications.<sup>96</sup>
- About half of the households on the mailing lists of the publications are made up of couples whose members both support the movement.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup>In the absence of any specific data on this point, this is a guess based on the closer affinity of COC supporters for the UCRF (which created *Fellowship Magazine*) and its successor, Fellowship Publications, in comparison with Church Alive supporters, who tended to be less aligned with the UCRF. *Fellowship Magazine* and *Concern* are also more similar to each other than either is to *Theological Digest and Outlook*, with the former two being aimed at a broad audience and the latter being aimed more at clergy and academic theologians.

<sup>96</sup>This is an estimate based on (a) information from Church Alive treasurer Norm Hockridge (e-mail to author, October 31, 2010) who says 52 percent of current *Theological Digest and Outlook* subscribers are receiving Fellowship Magazine, (b) an educated guess that another one-sixth of Church Alive members are also on the *Concern* mailing list but not the *Fellowship Magazine* list.

<sup>97</sup>This number is based on Dawson's estimate for the *Concern* mailing list.

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If we apply this information to the data given in table A1-1, and assume no major change in the size of the *Fellowship Magazine* between 2009 and 2010, we can estimate the total number of households who receive one or more of the renewal publications as  $3,871 + (2,849 \times 1/3) + (361 \times 1/3) = 4,941$ . Assuming that half of these households contain two individual supporters and the other half contain one, we can further estimate that there are  $4,941 \times 1.5 = \mathbf{7,412}$  individual supporters of the movement in total. (This can be rounded to 7,400 given the looseness of the estimate).

On the other hand, our assumptions about the amount of overlap between the groups or the number of supporters per household could be wrong. Assuming no overlap between the supporters of the three groups and an average of two supporters per household produces an upper estimate of 14,162 ( $\approx 14,200$ ) individual supporters. By assuming complete overlap between supporters of the three groups and an average of 1.25 supporters per household (assuming that one-quarter of households have two supporters and the rest have only one), we can produce a lower figure of 4,839 ( $\approx 4,800$ ) individual supporters. Both of these estimates disregard the best guesses of renewal group leaders about the amount of overlap and the number of supporters per household, however, so are highly unlikely to be correct; rather, they provide “goalposts” between which the correct figure almost certainly can be found.

The most recent denominational statistics available at the time of writing were from 2008, so to allow direct comparisons with the denomination as a whole, it is necessary to repeat the above procedure using 2008 data from the renewal groups:

Table A1-2. Renewal movement statistics, 2008

Group	Item	Number
Fellowship Publications	Copies mailed per issue, <i>Fellowship Magazine</i>	5,178
Community of Concern	Copies mailed per issue, <i>Concern</i>	3,140
Church Alive	Copies mailed per issue, <i>Theological Digest and Outlook</i>	372

Sources: Canada Post Invoice, September 28, 2008, RFP; “Concern Mailing,” (2010), document from David Dawson in possession of author; Norm Hockridge (Church Alive treasurer), e-mail to author, July 26, 2010.

Using the same procedure as above, these figures produce a “best-guess” estimate of 9,524 ( $\approx 9,500$ ) individual supporters, an upper limit estimate of 17,380 ( $\approx 17,400$ ), and a lower limit estimate of 6,473 ( $\approx 6,400$ ) (all for 2008). These figures amount to 4.9, 9.0, and 3.3 percent of the total average weekly Sunday attendance for the United Church in 2008 (193,512).



## Appendix 2. Calculation of Evangelically Aligned Percentage of Sunday Attendance

The percentage of United Church Sunday attendance made up of evangelically aligned people can be estimated from the data from the 1996 Angus Reid survey and the 2003 Ipsos Reid survey. In both surveys, respondents were asked how often they attended church other than on special occasions (e.g., weddings, funerals, and baptisms). Responses were recorded in one of the following categories:<sup>98</sup>

- more than once a week
- once a week
- a few times a month
- once a month
- a few times a year
- at least once a year
- not at all

Of United Church respondents, evangelically aligned respondents attended far more often than other respondents, with the result that the evangelically aligned made up higher percentages of the higher-frequency categories of attendance (see table A2-1). Using the full 2003 data, for example, 42 of the 203 United Church respondents, or 21 percent, were evangelically aligned, while a much larger 58 percent of United Church respondents who attended church once a week or more were evangelically aligned. Comparing the 2003 and 1996 results by the six questions they had in common suggests that the evangelically aligned proportion of United Church affiliates was fairly similar between the two years, as was their distribution in frequency of attendance categories.

<sup>98</sup>From data supplied by Rick Hiemstra.

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**Table A2-1.** Evangelically aligned respondents as percentage of all United Church respondents, by frequency of attendance

Frequency of attendance	Percentage of United Church respondents who were evangelically aligned		
	2003 (all 8 questions)	2003 (6 common questions)	1996 (6 common questions)
Once a week or more <sup>a</sup>	58	59	66
A few times a month	26	19	18
Once a month	17	17	25
A few times a year	15	7	2
At least once a year	5	0	3
Not at all	4	2	0
All categories	21	17	18

*Notes:* The 2003 (all 8 questions) data measure evangelical alignment by an 8-question scale. An 8-question scale was also used in 1996, but since 2 questions were different from those used in 2003, comparisons need to be made using a narrower scale based on 6 questions. Consequently, the 8-question scale is a more useful measure of evangelical alignment, but the 6-question scale allows for an apples-to-apples comparison between 2003 and 1996, and is included here for comparative purposes.

<sup>a</sup> The “more than once a week” and “once a week” categories are combined here, because they both indicate weekly attendance at the main Sunday service.

*Sources:* Data from Angus Reid 1996 God and Society survey and Ipsos Reid 2003 Evangelical Beliefs and Practices survey, supplied by Rick Hiemstra.

To get from this breakdown by frequency of attendance to the percentage of average attendees who are evangelically aligned, it is necessary to estimate the percentage of all attendees on a given Sunday likely to come from each of the various categories of attendance frequency. This can be done by estimating the number of times per year a member of a given category could be expected to go to church, as shown here:

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**Table A2-2.** Distribution of Sunday attendance across frequency categories

Frequency of Attendance	Estimated Visits to Sunday Services (Number Per Year)	UC Respondents within Frequency Category <sup>a</sup> (Number)	Estimated Visits to Sunday Services by UC Respondents within Frequency Category (Number Per Year)	Estimated Percentage of Visits to Sunday Services by UC Respondents within Frequency Category
Once a week or more	52	38	1,976	65.8%
A few times a month	26	27	702	23.4%
Once a month	12	12	144	4.8%
A few times a year	3	53	159	5.3%
At least once a year	1	21	21	0.7%
Not at all	0	52	0	0.0%
All categories	n/a	203	3,002	100.0%

Sources: Ipsos Reid 2003 Evangelical Beliefs and Practices survey, supplied by Rick Hiemstra.

By multiplying the percentages of attendees drawn from each frequency of attendance category (right-hand column in table A2-2) by the percentages of evangelically aligned respondents in each frequency of attendance category (first column in Table A2-1) it is possible to estimate the total percentage of attendees on a given Sunday who will be evangelically aligned (table A2-3). The 2003 data rather than the 1996 data have been used for this calculation because (a) they are more recent, and (b) the questions used in 2003 provided a more accurate measure of evangelical alignment, due primarily to the improvement of the question about biblical authority (as discussed above).

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**Table A2-3. Estimation of evangelically aligned attendees as percentage of all attendees**

Frequency Category	Calculation (Estimated Percentage of Visits to Sunday Services by UC Respondents within Attendance Category × Percentage of UC Respondents within Frequency Category Who Were Evangelically Aligned)	Estimated Weighted Percentage of Visits to Sunday Services by Evangelically Aligned UC Respondents within Frequency Category
Once a week or more	65.8% × 58% =	38.2%
A few times a month	23.4% × 26% =	6.1%
Once a month	4.8% × 17% =	0.8%
A few times a year	5.3% × 15% =	0.8%
At least once a year	0.7% × 5% =	0.0%
Not at all	0.0% × 4% =	0.0%
Total	n/a	45.9%

Therefore, the results of the 2003 survey suggest that about 46 percent of the people attending a United Church on an average Sunday that year were evangelically aligned. In other words, evangelically aligned people make up more than two-fifths of active United Church affiliates.