

## **From the Heart About the Heart of the Matter**

### **THE STORY OF MY CONVERSION**

**by Edwin Searcy**

In 1968 I was fourteen. Our confirmation class studied the “New Creed” that was adopted by the General Council that year. The Mission and Service Fund produced stickers with psychedelic colours surrounding the motto “Live Love”, which echoed the Beatles’ anthem: “All you need is love”. I stuck them all over my bedroom door in my parents’ manse. I began to sense that I had a call to the ministry and, in 1971, became an intended candidate. The church that formed me taught me the importance of being relevant and progressive in the way we were living love. This was our gospel. Or so it seemed to me. And when I had been ordained I found that this was what my neighbours in the community assumed about my church and, therefore, about me. It was our collective identity.

Forty years have passed. I am nearing the conclusion of my third decade as an ordained minister within the United Church. Along the way the parishioners I have served have been witnesses to my conversion. I have slowly but surely been going through a transformation as I have accompanied congregations through the challenges of these years, struggling to respond faithfully to the fatigue and anxiety that has been a dominant feature of denominations like ours. I have come to believe that we have forgotten who — and whose — we truly are. Ours is a crisis of identity. Walter Brueggemann’s diagnosis of the illness of the North American mainline churches as one of communal amnesia makes sense of the symptoms that I witness. And Douglas John Hall’s argument resonates with me, where he says that the church we inhabit shares a cultural anxiety rooted in despair lurking beneath a thin veneer of optimism.

I have been led to turn to a different source for hope. My journey of repentant turning and rebirth occurred Sunday by Sunday,

text by text, as I was evangelized by the gospel I was compelled to preach. No longer did I locate hope in my progressiveness or in our relevance. Now I began to dare to trust in the power of God to make new beyond my limited capacity or the capacity of our collective programmatic fixes. No longer did I assume that the problem in the pews and the pulpit was a lack of willingness to “live love”. Now I began to rediscover the cruciform shape of the love revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No longer did I imagine that the Christian life is common sense. Now the peculiar ways and doings of a gospel people are the signs of an enduring counter-culture that require a lifetime of cultivation. When I began my ministry I took delight in being a skilled translator of the faith, able to make the Bible reasonable and understandable to my neighbours. Now I imagine that I am more akin to a rabbi whose calling is to preserve the odd mother tongue, and the strangely distinctive character of God’s people, so that these can be passed to the next generation in diaspora.

I notice that the church that birthed me has, for the most part, continued along the path that it was on when I was confirmed. The place of the “New Creed” in our church is an important sign that this is so. Since 1968 it has become, in practice, the only creed used in our denomination. Rare is the United Church congregation which says one of the ecumenical creeds. At baptisms and confirmations we recite our New Creed. During services of ordination and commissioning at annual Conference meetings we say our New Creed. I suspect that there would be an outcry if one of the ecumenical creeds were to replace the New Creed at one of those services. Few speak about the significance of our alienation from those foundational affirmations that have long belonged to the world-wide church.

I wonder why this is so. I expect that we have adopted the New Creed as our sole functioning one because its language seems to be more relevant: no more embarrassing words about the Father almighty, or the Virgin Mary, or the resurrection of the body, or the ascension into heaven. It is important to us that the creed is in language we understand, that it makes sense and can be explained

in a straightforward way. We are less comfortable with the Apostles' and Nicene creeds because they seem like a foreign language, like an odd and ancient faith not contemporary and progressive enough. So we silence these creeds by neither saying them, nor teaching them to our children.

Yet I stand as one whose conversion is the result of a growing engagement with the historic and contemporary ecumenical church beyond our own denomination. I owe my rebirth in the faith to writers, teachers and colleagues who have shared with me the riches of the historic ecumenical tradition, and to parishioners who have responded eagerly to my attempts give voice to this peculiar language and world. In learning the rhythms and cadences of the early creeds I have been given back a memory, and with it a transformed trust in a Triune God so much more peculiar and mysterious and wonderful than the One I met "in-house" in the beloved denomination of my upbringing. I am so profoundly grateful to have been met by the wonderfully relevant gospel of new life in the most surprising of places — in the language and texts and traditions that I had learned to label as irrelevant.

What does the witness of my conversion offer to the church? I am not sure. One thing I can say with confidence: there are no quick fixes that can remedy the bedeviling ailment whose most evident symptoms are communal amnesia and covert despair. Desiring to be relevant and delighting in being progressive cannot get to the heart of the illness that saps our energy. But there is the hope that this stubborn disease can be healed by a slow, sustained re-discovery of our true identity and of the surprising source of our deep hope — namely, the living voice of the living God through the living witness of the prophets, apostles and saints. Thanks be to God.

Editor's Note: When I got the typescript of this article back from my invaluable copy editor, Colleen Armstrong, I found that she had written on the top in red ink, "Hear! Hear!"