

**REV. DR. JOHN H. YOUNG****Biographical Statement**

John H. Young grew up in the village of Douglastown in northeastern New Brunswick. He received his B.A. (Honours, History) from Mount Allison University (Sackville, NB) and his M.Div. from the Atlantic School of Theology (Halifax, NS). He then studied at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX, where he completed a Ph.D. in the History of Christianity. He is currently an Assistant Professor and the Chair of the Theology Program at the Queen's School of

Religion, where he also teaches in the areas of Church History and Ministry Studies.

John was ordained by the Maritime Conference of the United Church in 1978. He served two United Church pastoral charges—Rawdon Pastoral Charge in Nova Scotia and Harrowsmith-Verona Pastoral Charge in Ontario—prior to joining the faculty of Queen's School of Religion in 1991.

He has served on, and been the chair of, a number of committees at both the presbytery and the Conference level. He served as the President of Bay of Quinte Conference in 2008–2009. He is also a former member and a past chair of two national United Church committees: the Committee on Theology and Faith, and the Manual Committee. He is currently a member of the Executive of the General Council, and serves as a member of the Supervisory Committee for the General Secretary, General Council.

John has given leadership in the area of the rural church and rural ministry, including serving as President of the Rural Church Network of the United States and Canada. He has published a number of articles in *Touchstone* related to various aspects of the current life or the history of the United Church. He is also the author of a chapter in the recently published *The United Church of Canada: A History*.

John Young is a nominee for Moderator of The United Church of Canada by Belleville Presbytery in Bay of Quinte Conference.

**Statement**

As a baby boomer, I grew up in a time when almost everyone attended church regularly or, if they were not Christian, they had a similar involvement in another religious tradition. Non-involvement in a church in the New Brunswick village of my childhood was highly countercultural; you stood out. Today, not only in that community, but across the country, it is involvement in a church or a synagogue or a temple that is highly countercultural; by your regular attendance at a service of worship, you now stand out.

This change affects us in the United Church particularly. Those who joined together in 1925 to form The United Church of Canada were motivated, among other things, by the goal of creating a strong national church. This United Church would have influence in local communities and in

the nation as a whole. They had a collective vision of a “united and a uniting church,” with the resources and the moral influence to change Canadian society for the better. As late as the 1960s, perhaps even into the 1970s, we retained a version of this understanding. Society also supported, at least informally, the practice of a religious tradition.

That is not our world. But who are we and what is our identity in a society where the practice of any faith tradition is met mostly with ambivalence, and occasionally with overt hostility? How do we be the church, for ourselves and for others, in this changed world? Answering those questions is crucial. Intellectually we know that our society has changed, but we have yet to think through, or come to terms with, many of the implications of those changes.

The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has used the concept of “exile” to describe the current situation of mainline Christians in Canada and the United States. For the people of Israel, exile in Babylon meant the loss of home, of their known world, with its societal and cultural supports for their religious tradition. In that Babylonian exile, modern Judaism was born. But such a birth was no sure thing. It required new approaches to thinking about the faith tradition and passing it on. We have neither left Canada nor lost our possessions. However, Brueggemann’s concept of exile is helpful for beginning to rethink our identity as a church and for how we shall be the church in these changed circumstances. This concept also helps to make clear other implications and issues that are part of that “rethinking.”

What are some of those other implications and issues? First, we need to recognize that we are not who we were. Change has brought losses, many of them painful. Declining numbers have meant new fragility for many congregations and closure for others. We can no longer support some outreach we previously saw as crucial. We fear something valuable that the United Church has represented is being lost. We need to grieve.

Second, we need to reorient ourselves to church involvement being countercultural. As a congregational minister, I learned the value of affirming the work and commitment of my parishioners. Undoubtedly there is a place for self-critique. But we need to affirm and to actively give thanks for the presence and commitment of those who faithfully attend and maintain United Church congregations in the face of strong societal pressures to do otherwise. Their involvement is countercultural, and it requires patience, stamina, and, in some places, courage. Even as we undertake new forms of ministry that are not congregationally based, congregations and those who attend them remain the key base of our denomination. If our congregations are not strong and supported, Christianity will not fade away, but the United Church would, a loss I would regard as tragic.

Third, we need to overcome our ambivalence about evangelism or “sharing our story” (which is my practical definition of the word “evangelism”). The ambivalence is understandable. In the world of my youth, when almost everyone was part of a congregation, “doing evangelism” usually meant trying to move someone from their denomination to yours, a practice upon which we would all frown and one that has given the term “evangelism” a bad name. But that world of my youth is not our world. A large and increasing number of Canadians have no involvement with any religious community; they have no concept whatever of the church, its worship, its vocabulary, or its practices. We live in a time when we need to be open to talk about our faith or

to “share our story” when the neighbour down the road or across the back fence who has no connection to any faith community asks us about what we believe, or why we go to church, or why we care about a particular issue in the way we do. The Emerging Spirit campaign was developed based on the conviction that we have such neighbours.

Fourth, our changed circumstances also require making a teaching ministry a key priority in worship and in congregational life. Christians have done so before when the knowledge of the faith tradition seemed low. When unchurched individuals do try us out, we need to offer basic instruction in the faith tradition and in what it means to lead a life governed by one’s faith. In my experience, many current members would also like such instruction to help them deepen their faith and to live lives that are more congruent with the things they believe.

Trying to support our ministry personnel and our congregations and ministries, encouraging us to think about how to be the church in these times, and cultivating the ground to allow for a new common vision to develop in the years that lie ahead would be my focal points should I be chosen Moderator.