The United Church of Canada General Council

GCE Adoption Report 2018

True Document Date
March 2, 2018

Theologies of Adoption

Preface

At its November, 2013, meeting, the General Council Executive directed the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee “to research and devise a position paper regarding adoption and create a United Church of Canada statement on adoption.” In doing so, it was to “Give consideration to other denominational statements on adoption and to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.” This request by the General Council Executive flowed from a report it received from an Adoptions Task Group it had established in March, 2013, as a result of meetings from 2010 – 2012 between General Council staff and various individuals and organizations concerned with the experiences of women whose children were placed for adoption. The United Church was also represented at meetings of ecumenical leaders and these groups. Of particular concern in these meetings was the matter of those who had felt forced, during the period from 1940 – 1980, to place their children for adoption.

In developing a statement on adoption, the Committee has been struck by the complexity of adoption. For some—whether an adoptee, an adoptive parent, or a parent who placed a child for adoption—the experience has been largely positive. For others, that experience has been painful and negative, and for still others, mixed. Over the past century significant changes in societal attitudes regarding the concept of “the family,” not to mention cultural differences in how various communities understand “family,” add to the complexity.

Though previous United Church statements have addressed family life from various perspectives, no previous United Church statement has directly addressed adoption. In this report, the Committee has tried to reflect the complexity of diverse experiences while offering guidance to the contemporary Church.

Introduction: The Story of Moses

According to the Book of Exodus, Moses, the great prophet and leader of the Hebrew people, was adopted. At the time he was born, the Pharaoh of Egypt had ordered that all Hebrew baby boys be killed. Moses' mother placed him in a basket in the river Nile to protect him. Soon, he was discovered by the daughter of the Pharaoh and adopted. He became the adopted grandson of the very man who threatened to kill him.

Biblical readers may rightly celebrate the actions of this Egyptian woman; she showed compassion to a vulnerable child and acted to protect his life. We may also celebrate the courage of Moses' mother in protecting him from the time of his birth. Adoption saved Moses' life.

Yet, later, Moses reclaimed his Hebrew identity and became a leader among the Hebrew people. The Book of Hebrews, written centuries later, celebrates this reclamation as an act of faith: "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin" (Hebrews 11:24-25).

In the story of this one person, we see multiple perspectives of adoption: a context of oppression and genocide; adults working together to support a child; the crossing of cultures; and the search for identity. The story describes love, sacrifice, loss, and gain.

In preparing this report, the Committee reviewed dozens of personal stories of adoption. These stories reflected a wide spectrum of experience. Many stories described adults working together to support children and sometimes to save their lives. Some stories told of individuals and communities turning to non-traditional methods of family creation by bringing together families of choice when biological families did not, or could not, offer what they needed. Other stories reflected a reality of coercion, control, and loss, a reality that has also been a part of the history of adoption in the Canadian and Western context. Certainly, many stories addressed the question of identity. Like Moses, many people affected by adoption have asked themselves, "Who am I really?"

The reality of adoption is complex. Like any other institution, it has facets that are life giving and facets that are not. Our work in this area has forced us to embrace the tension between the joy, love, and sense of belonging that adoption has brought so many, and the pain, loss, and coercion that mark the experience for many others. It became clear that this aspect of family is as varied and unique as the people who have been touched by it in their lives.

Some History—United Church Maternity Homes, 1901-1989

The Door of Hope, a maternity facility located at 295 Jarvis St., Toronto, opened its doors in 1901, twenty-four years before the founding of The United Church of Canada. Later, the United Church would run this facility, along with dedicated facilities in Burnaby, Winnipeg, and Montreal, and some other homes and mission facilities that provided a residence to pregnant women as part of their work. The majority of the women who resided at these facilities were not married. Many were vulnerable. During the period between the end of World War II and 1980, most were pressured, coerced, one might even say forced, to place their children for adoption.

In 2013, the United Church contracted with an external researcher to compile a history of these church-run maternity facilities. That report, "United Church Maternity Facilities: Review of Historical Adoption Policies and Practices," describes the experiences of seven women who resided at these facilities during the 1960s and 1970s. They recounted verbal and physical abuse, inadequate care, loneliness, and shame. One woman compared the facility to a jail. They were told that they would not be capable of raising their child, and that adoption was the only option. They were not informed of their rights.

The report offers the following context for the period that stretched from the 1940s to the 1970s:

> The prevailing view was that adoption was best for all parties because it gave new life to a child who would otherwise be stigmatized as “illegitimate,” and gave the mother an opportunity to return to her family and community unaffected by this perceived misstep.

In reflecting on this period, we note that a body/spirit dualism has characterized much of the history of Western Christianity. This dualism, which is promoted in some historical United Church statements and resources, has resulted in a body-averse culture, suspicious of sexuality and, in particular, of women's sexuality. Pregnancy outside marriage often resulted in shame, affecting both the pregnant woman and her family. Many families and communities, especially in the time period noted above, encouraged women to remove this shame by placing their children for adoption.

We strongly reject this body/spirit dualism. We uphold sexuality as a gift from God. We do not believe any person is "illegitimate" in the eyes of God, but affirm that every person is cherished by God. Remembering that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was herself an unmarried woman, we call on the church to repent its role in shaming women.

The Sixties Scoop

During the same period, many Indigenous communities in Canada experienced the forced removal of children. This practice came to be known as the "Sixties Scoop", though it extended beyond the 1960s. Mostly non-Indigenous families, including members of the United Church, adopted Indigenous children during this period. Undergirding these adoptions was a sense of cultural superiority, not unlike the attitudes that led to the founding of residential schools. The removal of children from their homes, some believed, was justified, because it meant providing a "better" community and culture for the child.

At the centre of this assertion of cultural superiority lies assumptions with regard to both family and community. The tragedies which accompanied many adoptees in the “Sixties Scoop” can often find their genesis in a prevailing lack of respect for the communal nature of many Indigenous cultures. Former Moderator Bob Smith, who

together with his wife, Ellen, adopted an infant Indigenous girl, supports this contention when he commented that “white social workers did not understand the family structure of Indian society. They had no concept of the extended family and the fact that for a child to be without their natural mother or father did not mean the child would be raised poorly or deprived, because other members of the extended family could take their place” (*The United Church Observer,* April 2015).

While the experience of adopted Indigenous children in non-Indigenous homes varied greatly, removal from culture, community and family represents an incalculable harm. Raven Sinclair, an associate professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Regina, was adopted by Bob and Edith Bater. At the time of the adoption, Bob was a professor at St. Andrew’s College in Saskatoon. Sinclair speaks with affection and gratitude with regard to her late adoptive father and describes him as “accountable, ethical and anti-racist.” However, she said that her adoptive father came to regret the act of adoption even though he loved her. “He knew that despite their good intentions, they couldn’t give me what I needed: my indigenous heritage, my language, my culture. People can have the best of intentions but that doesn’t mean it wasn’t wrong” (*The United Church Observer*, April 2015).

The Choice to Become a Parent

Some of the most familiar scripture stories of mothers describe infertility: women who wished to be mothers but who were initially unable to conceive a child. Sarah, the mother of Isaac; Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin; Hannah, the mother of Samuel; and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist—all experienced a period of infertility. This situation is described as a cause of suffering for these women. In the Bible, children are portrayed as a cherished gift and a blessing from God. Thus, when she became pregnant, Elizabeth proclaimed: “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people” (Luke 1:25).

The experiences of these biblical women reflect the experiences of many women and men who wish to become parents but are unable to do so. We grieve with those adults who have experienced a sense of loss because of infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death, and with those who wished to become a parent and did not, whatever the reason.

At the same time, we affirm the choice of those adults who do not wish to become parents, and uphold the value of every loving family, whether or not it includes children.

Both our churches and our society have often pressured adults to become parents. Those who are not parents, and those who are unable to become parents, may be told, overtly or implicitly, that their family is incomplete. The church has privileged the nuclear family: two married adults living with their children (and traditionally, heterosexual adults). For some adults, the choice to adopt is shaped by this pressure, by a desire to form a nuclear family. Adoptive parents may believe they will receive support and affirmation as parents that they might not otherwise experience. For some women, hearing these messages and being unable to have a child has led to questions about their role in church and society, and whether it could be God's will that they should not be a parent.

Unmarried mothers have sometimes faced similar pressure. Women living in United Church maternity facilities and other unmarried mothers after World War II were told they were not capable of being a parent, or that their family—a single parent family or an extended family—was not suitable for a child.

One mother described her feelings following placing her child for adoption:

> I identified as bad, of no intrinsic value to anyone. I felt that no one loved me and, in fact, I was not loveable. I identified as a lone being, loved by none and a bother to all. I no longer felt part of anything outside myself.

We celebrate that Canadian society now recognizes more diversity in families than it once did. Many kinds of families are now recognized and celebrated within society: adults without children, a single parent with children, siblings who raise and support each other, grandparents parenting children, same sex couples raising children, unmarried couples, separated couples raising children together, step families, groups of people who live together and support each other. Moreover, interracial, intercultural, and interfaith families are becoming more common.

The biblical stories present a diversity of families, families that are made biologically, through law (adoption, marriage), and by choice (people coming together willingly to nurture and support each other). The Bible does not show a preference for certain familial make ups, instead presenting a diversity of families.

We are called to view families similarly. We believe there are many positive, faithful models of family. We celebrate healthy families—families of any form that create safety, love, and opportunity for their members.

Recognition for Loving Families

In our consultations, we encountered a wide spectrum of experience with adoption. As with other cultural institutions relating to the formation of family, such as marriage, for example, adoption has been a source of joy, security, pain, heartbreak, confusion, and love. The experience of adoption is as varied as the people whose lives have been touched by it. What has been described by some adoptees as a blessing has been described by others as a cause of great hurt and pain. Some of those who have given up children have subsequently experienced great regret, a regret frequently coupled with anger at a society and its institutions that, at certain points in our history, put great pressure on some groups of persons to choose adoption for their children. Others have had the experience of adoption bringing richness to their lives, providing them with loving and stable homes, and affirming their identities.

For those who choose to form a family through adoption, formal, legal recognition of the adoption offers freedom and dignity. It is in some ways similar to the right to marry. Courts in both Canada and the US found the right to marry to be fundamental to both individuals and communities. This right must be apply equally and not be withheld as a means of discrimination. Limiting access to formal adoption has the same discriminatory potential: it denies particular individuals and communities their rightful place within Canadian society.

LGBTQT2+ communities have been marginalized in many ways throughout Canada’s history. These communities have found that creating families of choice, either through formal or informal means, has been a matter of survival. It has also validated their identities. For example, these communities have, for decades, banded together when their biological families have abused or abandoned them, creating families of choice by taking each other in, often in the form of older, more established LGBTQT2+ people supporting and informally adopting younger LGBTQT2+ people without resources. This has provided not only survival for those youth but opportunities for them to be loved, cared for, and validated in who they are when they had no one else.

As LGBTQT2+ rights continued to progress, having their families recognized formally through marriage and adoption (including step-parent adoption and third party adoption) was a means of the Canadian culture recognizing the equality of LGBTQT2+ people. It also provided new opportunities for many children who needed homes and families. Laws prohibiting LGBTQT2+ people from parenting their biological children or from accessing adoption have been a means of oppressing those communities. Changes to these laws have been a large part of the advancement of human rights in Canada.

Other communities with a long history of informal adoption as part of family creation include the Indigenous communities of Canada. Their traditions often saw children raised as part of a larger community that included multi-generational extended families. When these cultures are allowed to practice their traditional means of child rearing, the communities can thrive.

Adoption has been a boon not only for marginalized communities. Step-parent adoption has been a way of recognizing and legitimizing important relationships which already exist. The legal framework allows a formal recognition which can be very meaningful for those involved. Recently, courts in Ontario recognized two friends as parents of a child with disabilities, providing additional stability and care for that child. Adoption is a way of recognizing that not all family relationships are based on biology, and since adoption creates equivalent rights and obligation under the law, it provides to parent/child relationships which are not rooted in biology the same status, the same validity, as those which are.

As a church, we stand with marginalized and vulnerable people and families. We stand with recognizing and supporting the healthy, loving families which are created every day through biological and non-biological means. We wish to uphold the dignity of all people. We uphold the rights of parents and communities in determining the future of their children. We uphold the right of children in every family to be cared for with love.

Upholding Human Dignity

Across Canada and throughout the world, some communities and families have been harmed by unethical practices of adoption.

Both domestic and international adoption sometimes favours privileged adoptive parents above the wishes and dignity of biological parents and communities. An attitude of cultural superiority has guided many of the people and agencies involved in adoption. Affluent adoptive parents, it has often been assumed, will provide a better life for a child than biological parents living in poverty. Single parents, racialized parents, and parents living in poverty have often been pressured, coerced, or forced to place a child for adoption.

One mother described the pressure to place her child for adoption:

> Staff and visiting Social worker consistently undermined my ability to parent. [I was] informed many times that mothers who wanted to keep their children were selfish, immature, or the “other kind of girl"; that I was not fit to mother my child; my child deserved better than me.

In some communities, including some Indigenous communities in Canada, many children have been removed from a single community through domestic or international adoption. In such cases, community members may be provided with incorrect information about adoption, or otherwise pressured. The removal of many children from a single community has profoundly harmful effects. Children have a unique vocation within their community, and caring for children gives meaning and purpose to the life of a community. The removal of children leads to a loss of identity, purpose, and dignity, and denies the community the unique gifts of the children. At worst, adoption can contribute to cultural genocide.

Nor is adoption always in the best interests of a child. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, each child has, "as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents." Moreover, "in those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language." Many children removed from their biological families through adoption have experienced a loss of identity and culture. Some have also experienced abuse and neglect in institutions, foster homes, and adoptive homes. It is the responsibility of governments and child welfare agencies to ensure foster homes and adoptive homes provide suitable care to children, and uphold their rights.

We strongly urge all those involved in adoption, including adoption agencies and potential adoptive parents, to insist upon the ethical practice of adoption. Prejudice and concepts of cultural, racial, or class superiority must not influence decisions about adoption. All steps must be taken to protect the rights of children. Wherever possible, the wishes of biological families and communities must be respected, and their dignity must be upheld at all times.

Caring for Children

At the same time, there remain in our society children who, for any number of reasons, are in need of a safe home. Some have experienced abuse or neglect. Others have been abandoned or rejected by their families, and still others have no family.

The Bible uses the word "orphan" primarily to describe those children whose father has died or abandoned them. These children were among the most vulnerable members of the society of their time. The Bible commands us to care for orphans, and from this teaching we learn of God's great care for all children in need.

Above all else, orphans are not to be abandoned. The whole community has a responsibility to ensure that vulnerable children receive both care and protection. In Psalm 68, God is described as an adoptive parent to orphans: “Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation” (Psalm 68:5). In the Book of Job, when Job defends his life of virtue, he declares: "I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper” (Job 29: 12).

Adoptive parents may be motivated by a desire to follow the example of Job and many other faithful people who cared for children in need. Some adopt children who would otherwise not have a safe, stable home.

One person who was adopted described her adoptive family with gratitude:

> I thank God for giving me such a loving, caring, patient and understanding family. This has enabled me to become a loving caring and compassionate human being.

We celebrate and honour adoptive parents. We recognize the love, compassion, and care many adoptive parents have shown to adopted children. Some children have

found belonging, acceptance, and love in an adoptive home they would not have experienced elsewhere. We give thanks for adoptive families.

A particular mention must be made of children with disabilities. Many children with disabilities wait a long time to be adopted. One adoptee shared the following story:

> The Children's Aid Society told my parents they had a child who was “unadoptable” because... I was born with a club foot, which means one foot was smaller than the other, and it was turned in so much it touched my calf. This didn’t seem to bother my parents at all because they had so much love to give and they chose me.

We strongly affirm the right of all children to a safe home. We lament the discrimination faced by children with disabilities, itself a reflection of wider societal attitudes of discrimination toward people with disabilities.

A previous report adopted by General Council 42, *Theologies of Disabilities*, stated:

> Healing entails the restoration of community, removing barriers to belonging, for Jesus had already recognized people with disabilities as part of God’s community. Healing marks Jesus’ radical hospitality, which fosters new possibilities for the wellbeing (*shalom*) that comes from living in transformed relationships with Christ, with oneself, and with others.

We call on the church to work toward this kind of healing. Communities of faith have a particular opportunity to support and affirm children with disabilities and their families, and to remove barriers to belonging within our families, communities, and society.

Supporting the Whole Family

In almost every case, when the Bible mentions caring for orphans, it also mentions caring for widows. Sometimes other vulnerable people, such as immigrants, are mentioned as well. These Bible passages do not address adoption. Instead, they insist the wider community take responsibility for those who are vulnerable. Single parent families, families living in poverty, or families experiencing other difficulties must be shown special support and care.

In the dominant culture of the twentieth century, the weakening of community systems and the increasing mobility of the workforce led to an isolation of the nuclear family from the wider community. As a church, we can learn from Indigenous traditions. While the many Indigenous communities in Canada are diverse in cultural practices and language, a common thread found in many communities is the intimate connection between individual families and the wider community. Child rearing is not considered to be the exclusive preserve of parents but, rather, is something that is shared in a network of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and neighbours.

The isolation of families, especially vulnerable families, can place parents and children in a difficult position. One adoptee described how lack of support for her biological mother led to the adoption. The government, this adoptee insists, should have done more to support the family:

> Adoption is not an act of charity facilitated by the state. Charity would have provided my mother with an income, supported housing, and child care while she furthered her education.

Today, we have an opportunity to re-examine the role of families within our wider communities. Churches, in particular, have a role to play in encouraging families to support one another and to help the recovery of a sense of community. Many United Church outreach ministries, including the Massey centre, a former maternity facility, strive to do this, providing support and programs for parents and families, including single-parent and non-traditional families. As churches, we do not see people merely as individuals, but as members of a larger body. From Jesus, we learn about our responsibility to one another. Friendship, prayer, support groups, parenting groups, family activities, cooking classes, delivering food, and spending time together are all ways to support one another in family life. We call on churches to care for families and to offer support to all parents, especially parents who are struggling.

Who am I Really?

Many of the adoptees who submitted stories to us reflected on the question of identity and belonging. Some described a search for their biological family as a quest to learn more about themselves. Some described adoption as a loss of identity, while others experienced belonging in their adoptive family. Many

described their identity as complex and multi-layered.

The adoptee quoted above also described adoption as a loss of identity:

> Adoption is a legal proceeding that stole my identity and hid it as a state secret in my Children's Aid Society file. My identity is my human right and taking it from me is a fundamental violation of my humanity. I am a second-class citizen; as an adopted person I am the only citizen who does not have the inalienable right to know who I am and where I belong.

Another adoptee noted:

> I would like to discover my past. I think it would give me a greater sense of being and peace.

Multiple factors shape our identity: biology, gender, race, religious tradition, age, generation, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, profession, geographic location, political affiliation, family, languages, abilities, education, and more. In turn, our identity shapes us: we associate with certain groups, dress a certain way, pursue certain goals, and participate in the greater world in alignment with how we perceive ourselves, our limits, our dreams. Identity also shapes our experiences in the world—we face certain opportunities or barriers based on how the world reads certain characteristics about us. We are included, invited, tolerated, celebrated, excluded, heard, or ignored depending on the climate of the community around us.

For those who are adopted, biological identity and family identity take on a particular significance. Some adoptees experience a disconnection between these two identities. Others identify strongly with their community of birth or with their adopted community, while still others feel a dual sense of belonging.

In most families, some connections are biological, while others are covenantal, formed by a promise of love and commitment. We view adoption as a form of covenant. We believe biology forms part of a person's identity, but primary or ultimate value comes from God.

In the Christian tradition, all identity is rooted in God. God is described as the Creator of all human beings, and as a parent, both a mother and a father. In Psalm 139 the psalmist proclaims that it was, indeed, the Creator "who formed my inward

parts” and who “knit me together in my mother’s womb.” As a parent, God is more faithful than any human parent. "If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up" (Psalm 27:10). "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15). All people may find love and belonging in God, regardless of their family circumstances.

We celebrate the multiple identities of all people, including adoptees. We urge church communities, and, indeed, all communities, to embrace adoptees as full members of their families.

One Family: A Spirit of Adoption

In the letter to the Romans and in the letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul uses adoption as an image of our relationship with God, describing God as an adoptive parent. “So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God" (Galatians 4:7). "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption" (Romans 8:14-15). For Paul, being adopted meant being set free. It also meant receiving an inheritance—the grace of God.

Paul believed our status as adopted children of God is more important than any human relationships. Race, culture, economic status, family circumstances--these mattered less than our relationship with God. Through our relationship with God, we all are members of the same family: God's family. This conviction ought to lead us to treat others with openhearted acceptance and love.

Conclusion: What is Ethical Adoption?

We believe forced or coerced adoption is unethical. Before any child is adopted, the biological parents must be fully informed about the adoption. Vulnerable parents should not be pressured into making decisions about adoption. Potential adoptive parents must use care and caution to ensure biological family members are in support of the adoption.

Sometimes, children will have to be removed from their home due to abuse or neglect. In such cases, every effort must be made to avoid discrimination based on culture, race, or economic status. Additionally, assistance must be provided to

families to help them support children in a healthy way.

We believe the agency and choice of adopted children should also be honoured as much as possible. We urge adoptive parents to provide age-appropriate information to adopted children about the circumstances of their birth and about their biological family, community, and culture. Contact with the child's biological relatives may not always be possible, but the option of a future relationship should be kept open where it can be.

We encourage honesty and truth-telling. Keeping secrets, or blocking access to communities, harms children and families. Transparency in the process—open adoptions—is a way of ensuring as much agency as possible for all involved. The best way to support healthy families is to support people in making the best choices they can for themselves and their families. Such support means openness about information and options.

We grieve with all those adopted children and families who have been harmed by unethical adoption, who have been denied access to the truth, who have been cut off from family and community due to adoption. We sincerely regret the role the church has played in unethical adoption.

We offer this vision of adoption as a hope for the future: Adoption will honour, nurture, and value children. No matter what the circumstances of their birth, and no matter what their biological identity, children will be surrounded by love and accepted as full members of their family. Children will be instilled with a deep sense of belonging. Moreover, adopted children's multiple identities will be honoured, and, in the case of cross-cultural adoption, children will have the opportunity to participate in both their biological and adopted culture. Children will be empowered to shape their own identity and to live out their own unique vocation in the world.

Document Type: Report, Social Policy
General Council: GC43 or earlier
Originating Body: General Council Executive