



The United Church of Canada General Council

The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture

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From October 1989 to the end of 1990, the United Church was involved in the study of the document *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (referred to as the Study Document in this report). As the statistics show, in terms of the sheer numbers of persons involved and responses received, it has been one of the most extensive church studies. People came to the study with different levels of energy and spiritual expressions and with a variety of expectations and assumptions. A participant in one Conference event spoke for many involved in the study when she said, "People came...looking for a garden ready to harvest but were given dirt and tools." It is a good metaphorical description; what we offer as a report reflects the labour of many Christian people, at home and abroad, who were not afraid to plough in with hope of a good harvest.

As we offer the produce of that harvest, the question arises: why did we plant the garden in the first place?

As early as 1985, the General Council Executive gave some urgency to the task of clarifying the United Church's position on scripture. It requested the Theology and

Faith Committee to assume leadership in this regard. In response, the committee brought a report on scripture to the 32nd General Council. It was received and the following motion was passed:

That the General Council receive this document and commend it to the church for reflection and response with a report to the 33rd General Council.

A second motion was passed, in the context of debate on the report, "Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation, Lifestyles and Ministry," expanding the terms of the first motion. It read:

That there be further church-wide study of the authority and interpretation of scripture and the theological and cultural premises that inform our understanding.

Such references encourage us to question more deeply. Why such a mandate? A number of reasons may be given. The church sensed among its members a desire to have their voices and views on scripture heard. In addition, it recognized that the nature of authority was unclear for many in the church in a way that affected every area of life. The church realized that few things are accepted on face value anymore—even the Bible. Some assumptions about the Bible's place and significance in our lives, individually and collectively, were being questioned. It was becoming clear that few Christians (including United Church members) regularly read or study the Bible and that answers to perplexing moral and ethical questions could not immediately be drawn from its pages. What authority, then, does it have with us and how does that authority arise for us? Those were the substantive questions resting at the heart of the study as a whole.

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