

REV. DR. JOHN H. YOUNG**Nominating Bodies**

Kente Presbytery and Upper Valley Presbytery (Bay of Quinte Conference)

Biographical Sketch

John H. Young grew up in the village of Douglastown in northeastern New Brunswick. He received his BA (Honours, History) from Mount Allison University (Sackville, NB) and his MDiv from the Atlantic School of Theology (Halifax, NS). He then studied at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX, where he completed a PhD in the History of Christianity. He is currently an assistant professor at the School of Religion, Queen's University, and he served from 2011 until earlier this year as the chair of its theology program. His teaching has been primarily in the areas of

Church History and Practical Theology. He 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 Theological College (now the School of Religion), Queen's University, in 1991. Teaching theology students has been, for him, ministry in another setting.

While in congregational ministry and in his current teaching ministry, John has served on, and been the chair of, a number of committees at both the presbytery and the Conference level. He is a past Chair of Kingston Presbytery. He was 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 (1988–1994) and The Manual Committee (2000–2009). From 2007 to 2009 he served as chairperson of a national Task Group on the Number of Commissioners to General Council. He is currently completing his second three-year term as Bay of Quinte Conference's ministry personnel representative on the Executive of the General Council. He has been a member of the Supervisory Committee for the General Secretary, General Council, since 2009 and is currently its chairperson. He has long had a particular interest in the rural church and rural ministry, and he served two terms 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 and the history of the United Church. He is the author of several book chapters, including one in *The United Church of Canada: A History* that looks at the church from 1946 to 1960. He and the Rev. Dr. Catherine F. MacLean of St. Paul's United Church in Edmonton have recently co-authored a book on fresh ways to preach difficult doctrines that will be published this fall by United Church Publishing House.

Statement

Fifty to sixty years ago, new United Church buildings were being opened weekly, the equivalent of the M&S Fund increased 10 percent or more almost every year, Sunday schools suffered from

overcrowding, and membership grew every year. Today, as we know, the reality is different. Participation in a religious community has gone from being “the thing to do” to a thing hardly anyone does. Being involved these days in a church, or a synagogue, or a mosque makes you stand out as unusual in most communities. The major issues now facing the United Church all flow from an immense cultural shift that began in Canada in the late 1960s.

One issue with which we shall wrestle at the General Council meeting in Corner Brook is how to organize ourselves and use our resources. We are now much smaller than when we last did a major revision of our governance and operational structures about 45 years ago. This issue is a key one, and it has been a major, though by no means the only, focus of the Comprehensive Review Task Group’s work. The question is not whether we shall change but how we shall change.

A second and more important issue is the need to recognize the effect of that cultural shift on what it means to be the church. How do we learn, talk about, and live out our faith in a secular society increasingly ambivalent to the practice of any faith tradition? For instance, while we need to take stands and to develop clear, theologically grounded responses to current issues, we must also recognize that we now speak primarily to our own members and to like-minded constituencies. We no longer influence either government or society in any significant way by the announcements we make or the positions we take, though occasionally members of the wider society may “overhear” our statements and begin to think differently about a matter. These days, what influence we have comes mostly when our members write letters, or talk to others, or make intentional lifestyle choices as a result of their understanding of the faith, choices that lead family members or friends or neighbours to ask, “Why?”

Another part of being the church in our context is the need to give faith formation and teaching the faith tradition a more important place. Newcomers with no church background need, and many current members desire, a chance to deepen their knowledge of the faith tradition. People need to know the faith tradition if they are to live out of it.

Learning how to share our story in an increasingly secular culture is also part of this issue of how to be the church in our context. We cannot and must not engage in evangelism with a view of pulling people deeply committed to their denomination or their religious tradition to ours. At the same time, we need to learn how to do evangelism, or to share our story, when those around us who are “unchurched” want to know what we think, or wonder about the things we believe, or question why we act the way we do. Learning how to share our faith story in a Canada that is more secular, but also more religiously varied, was a concern the Emerging Spirit campaign of the previous decade tried to address. It is an area we still need to address.

A third issue is strengthening our congregations and the other non-congregational communities of faith that may arise from our congregations. If we do not have healthy congregations or communities of faith able to witness to their faith in word and in deed, neither our governance structures and procedures, nor our regional offices, nor our theological schools, nor anything else really matters. Those other entities are important, but they are important only insofar as their work is a resource to local communities of faith—congregational and non-congregational—and to those who make them up. The Comprehensive Review Task Group and other national

committees over the years have had it right in seeing the strengthening of our communities of faith as a critical issue. As we make decisions in Corner Brook about how to move forward, we need to use the lens “Will these decisions strengthen our communities of faith?”

Finally, we need to clarify who we are as The United Church of Canada. Our ancestors who dreamed about such a denomination in the early 20th century, and who brought it into being in 1925, had a very clear vision. They knew the purposes for which the denomination existed. Changes in Canada meant that shared vision had largely disappeared by the late 1960s. We have not found one to replace it. Yet, as one lay member put it recently when I was a guest at his church, “We need a vision if we are to have a future. Survival is not a vision.” He is right—on both counts. What are our non-negotiables or our key principles? What are those things essential to being the United Church, those things that make us who we are? I think some of these principles or “non-negotiables” are things that have been with us throughout our history, though they would look and function differently now from the way they did 50 or 75 or 90 years ago. We need to name those principles or “non-negotiables.” Doing so would begin to cultivate the ground so that a vision of who we are and who we want to be may again take root and grow.