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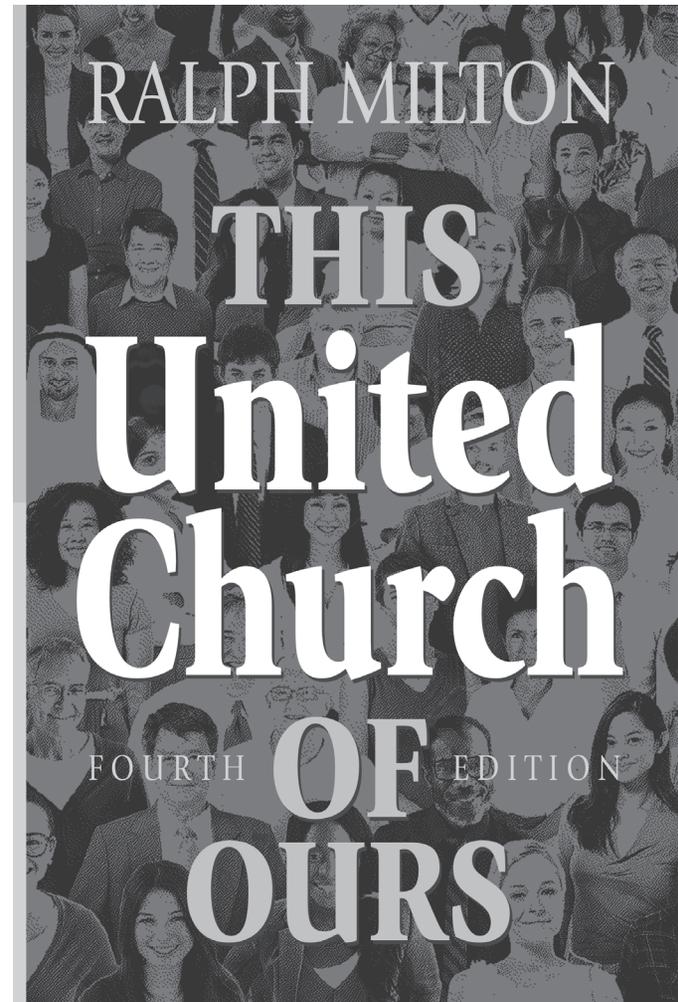
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# STUDY GUIDE



WOOD LAKE

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# FOREWORD

**R**alph Milton once said to me, “You and I, among others, have never fit the various slots in the United Church nomenclature, because we are often working for the church, directly or indirectly, and we are lay people, not in the sense of being uninformed about the work in question, but technically in that we have not been ‘done.’”

Ralph hasn’t been “done” (ordained) and I’m glad he isn’t done with our church, either. While he doesn’t fit easily into any of our church’s role-titles, there’s no one who better understands and loves the soul of our church, or who can describe it more clearly. And his deep understanding is always served with a generous helping of irresistible humour. If I were in charge of handing out fictional United Church titles, I’d anoint Ralph “The Most Irreverent” and trust he’d be delighted.

This new edition of the beloved *This United Church of Ours* is just what we need. If ever there was a time for us to laugh and to remember who we are, this is it. Humour and humility are married in these pages, reflecting the original sense of humour (bodily fluid) and humility (being “grounded,” from the word humus, of earth). Our body of faith is both grounded and fluid; our ways of doing things spring from deep roots and adapt to changing contexts; at our best, we are both serious and light-hearted.

You will read here about who we are as an increasingly diverse community of faith within a changing national landscape. The congregation in which I worship welcomes new members

frequently, and we should give every one of them a copy of this book. For newcomers, it offers a better understanding of our idiosyncrasies and core beliefs, from worship to money to ethical concerns. For long-timers, it reminds us about why we do what we do. Ralph does all of this with honesty, creativity, and personal revelation of his own love and frustrations.

Whenever I feel confused or alone, one of the things I do is pull out family albums or flip open my phone to see more recent photos. I long for the faces of those I love and enjoy, to remember how my story is linked to theirs, and what our story together means. Reading this book is like that. It reminds me who I'm connected to, through the love of Christ, in a great, evolving story of which we are each a part. It has me smiling and laughing out loud. It makes me sad and reflective sometimes, too, reminding me of the words in our *Song of Faith*, that we are "a community of broken but hopeful believers."

Finally it makes me weep over the beauty of it all and why I love this church. May you fall in love, too, and be blessed.

MARDI TINDAL

Former Moderator of the United Church of Canada  
(2009–2012)

## INTRODUCTION

**S**ince it was first released in 1981 (with a second edition in 1991 and a third edition in 2000) no book except for the Bible and hymnbooks) has been more used by United Church people as a study resource than *This United Church of Ours*.

The study groups during the first ten years used a guide prepared by Rev. Beverley Milton, who is married to author Ralph Milton. During the second ten years, Norma Goughnour wrote a new guide based on the work of Bev Milton.

This guide is based on the work of both those writers, but is designed for use with this fourth edition.

### Variety

No two study groups are alike. What works with one group might not work at all with another. So this resource offers you maximum flexibility to tailor the materials to fit your specific needs.

In designing this guide, we assumed that you, the leader, have some knowledge of the United Church in particular, and the Christian faith in general. That does not mean you need to be an expert. But you should know where to go for answers.

We also assume that you, the leader, have read the entire fourth edition of *This United Church of Ours*. But don't feel you'll be required to know everything. Feel free to bring in other leaders from your congregation who might help out with any particular session.

## Who can participate

A study of *This United Church of Ours* is not just for people new to the church. Hundreds of study groups across Canada have used the book to revitalize their church. Here are a few of the many kinds of groups that have enjoyed this study:

- teenage communicants class
- adults new to the United Church
- seasoned members wanting to know more about their church
- boards, sessions, worship committees – groups of clergy
- groups doing a needs assessment in order to call a new minister.

For those who would like to study the Christian faith at an introductory level, we recommend *God For Beginners*, also by Ralph Milton.

# LEADING A SUCCESSFUL STUDY GROUP

## Fellowship

Study groups serve many purposes. One of them is fellowship. This is particularly true in larger congregations where people may not know each other.

There may be many kinds of people in your group and it is important for them to find some common ground and to feel comfortable with each other. Name tags can be very helpful even if the group is not large. And it's always nice to have coffee or tea and perhaps cookies or muffins during the first session.

Encourage friendly "gossip" as people arrive, and after the study session itself is included.

## Number of sessions

We suggest 12 sessions. Experienced leaders can easily develop this material into more sessions or fewer sessions. But this guide is based on the 12 chapters in the book.

## Storytelling

It's important to get people telling personal stories as soon as they are comfortable doing so. That means you, the leader, must be prepared to do some storytelling too. For instance, if you ask your group to recall some early church experiences, it's helpful if you begin by telling something from your childhood or by sharing another early experience. The more personal stories you share, the more likely people in your group will share their own experiences.

Try to help people understand that when they tell personal stories or share feelings, there is no “right” and “wrong.” Don’t allow anyone in your group to criticize or deny someone else’s story or feelings. The appropriate response is to share a story or emotion of our own. Cultivate warmth and acceptance, rather than judgment.

## Language

People often know less about their faith and about the church than we assume. Words and ideas we take very much for granted may need to be explained, preferably with a personal story or anecdote to give them meaning.

One of our problems in the United Church is that we don’t use a religious vocabulary as easily as people in some churches do. Please be sensitive to this, and help people to find ways to express themselves without resorting to slogans and catch-phrases.

## Group size

You will have your own views on what size is best for a study such as this. We feel that most of the questions should be discussed in small subgroups of two, three, or four. But we have not put those instructions in each study session. You decide for yourself what size of group works best.

## Preparation

Please review the materials in this resource guide before each session. Select and adapt it to your own needs. Use only what you think is useful. Don’t try to cover all the discussions suggested. There’s far more in each one than you can possibly cover in a session.

## Patterns

Encourage people to express a variety of opinions. Be sure they feel free to disagree with what Ralph says in the book. He has described his own faith journey and experience, but that’s all it is. It is important that you encourage openness to differing ideas and concepts.

Develop an informal pattern for your sessions. Begin and end on time. Allow a few moments of informal conversation. If you feel comfortable, begin and end each meeting with a short prayer.

Most importantly, enjoy yourself! If you are relaxed, your participants will be too. To help that happen, prepare well, but then don’t take yourself too seriously. Be flexible and sensitive to the needs of the people in your group.

## Assumptions

Each session assumes that participants have read the relevant chapter in the fourth edition of *This United Church of Ours*. It would be wise to make this clear as you begin. This implies that each person has their own copy of the book.

## Attitude

As much as possible, discuss things in terms of the way they happen in your congregation. If someone asks a question and you don’t know the answer, make a note of it and promise to find out from the appropriate person. Try not to have this group turn into a complaining session. Church people sometimes tend to play destructive little game called, “Ain’t it awful,” in which everyone takes a turn bellyaching. But if there is a legitimate concern, ask, “What can *we* do about that?” Who knows, you might have something really valuable to suggest.

## Chapter 1

# NUTS AND BOLTS

Since this is the opening session, more time should be spent getting to know each other. So put on some coffee and cookies, introduce yourself, and invite people to introduce themselves. Even if they spend most of the time talking about themselves, that's just fine. Don't push them or ask them any tough questions at this point.

If they seem in the mood to talk about things, ask them to skim through the various topics in the first chapter to find things they were surprised at, disagreed with, or had a different experience of. (After all, things may be different in your particular church.)

As the name of the chapter implies, this is where we deal with miscellaneous questions people sometimes worry about when they first come to church. There may well be other questions of this nature. Let them know that most of these things are dealt with in more detail later, but make a note of concerns raised so you can bring them up at the appropriate time.

### Suggestions for the minister

If you've had new people come into your church, it might be possible to invite some of them to speak for a few minutes each about why they came to the church, and what they found when they got there. Or others who have been part of the church for some time might reflect on what it would be like to come into your congregation as a stranger.

It might be good to reflect on some of the hospitality issues faced in your congregation, and to compare those with biblical

passages on hospitality. Hospitality, in biblical times, was the process of receiving outsiders and changing them from strangers to guests. Check out Matthew 10:14–23, which is rather severe; or 1 Thessalonians 1:9; Philippians 5:16; or Mark 9:37. Both the Oxford and Harper's Bible commentaries have helpful passages on hospitality.

This could lead to a fine sermon on your congregation's hospitality.

## Chapter 2

# I'M NOT RELIGIOUS, BUT...

1. One way to get to know each other and to develop community is to build on some common experiences. In *This United Church of Ours*, Ralph Milton writes about his early experiences in the church. Briefly share your own early church memories, then ask others if they have memories they'd like to share. Where/when/how did you first come into contact with the church? What is your most vivid memory? Any funny or embarrassing moments that you can share?
2. When someone says "I'm not religious," what do you think they mean? Why do you think "being religious" seems to have a negative association for so many people?
3. What is an atheist? How is an atheist different from an agnostic? What is a cult? What cults are you aware of? How do these function? What does the book say is the difference between a religion and a cult?
4. What happens at your church that keeps you coming back? That challenges you? Strengthens you? Gives you stability? Helps you care for other hurting people? How could things be changed if this feeling is not present for all?
5. In 1925, the Union Churches, the Methodists, most of the Presbyterians, and the Congregational Churches formed the United Church of Canada. A United Church crest was developed to symbolize this union. Since then, the crest has been updated to include First Nations symbolism. Visit the national church website ([www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)) to read the story and have a look.) Print and bring a copy if you can. Look at the crest together and talk about the meaning of

the shape, the words, and each of the symbols and their roots in our tradition.

Note that there is no symbol representing the Evangelical United Brethren who became part of the United Church in 1968, nor is there a symbol for the hundreds of community churches in western Canada that joined the union.

Ask each person to think about which symbol best speaks to them right now. Talk about your own congregation. When did the congregation begin? What year was the building constructed? If your congregation was established before 1925, out of which tradition did it come?

6. *Shalom!* This is a word you will hear a lot in the United Church. It is a Hebrew word for "peace" and is used both as a greeting and as a farewell by Jewish people. Our English word "peace" does not do full justice to the word *shalom*, as it means much more than the absence of war. It means harmony, wholeness, and justice for all. It's easy to focus on the bad news; that's what newspapers and TV mostly cover. But why not think of good things that have happened in your world, in your community, in your church.

### Suggestions for the minister

This would be a very good occasion to share your own story with the group or the congregation. What was your religious upbringing? What does being a Christian mean to you personally? What are your struggles? It might be good not to include the story of how you were called into ministry, because that would fit better in connection with Chapter 7. And comments on why you remain a Christian and in the United Church might be more useful in connection with Chapter 12.

## Chapter 3

# SUNDAY MORNING

You may wish to invite one or more members of your congregational worship committee to join you for this session. Or perhaps your minister might be available. Whichever it is, that person should see the questions you plan to discuss far enough in advance to fill in any blanks in their knowledge.

1. You might open this session by spending a few moments in the total group remembering Sunday morning worship: the good, the bad, and the hilarious experiences in the United Church and in other churches you've attended. (You might want to read a story from Ralph's book *Angels in Red Suspenders*. Some suggestions: "When God Laughs," p. 76; "Now that's class," p. 78; or "Dangerous Goods," p. 79.)
2. What is a lectionary? Does your congregation use the *Revised Common Lectionary*? Why?
3. Are there parts of the worship service you don't enjoy? Is it necessary that everyone enjoys everything? Share the idea of worship as a smorgasbord, where there is always something for everyone, but not everything is for everyone. How could the worship service be used to meet the needs of a broad spectrum of ages and needs? Were you familiar with other forms of worship at other points in your faith journey? If so, what were they?
4. Look back at the different churches described in the book. Each has its own style and way of doing things. In which church would you feel most comfortable? Why? Which of the worship styles would be most meaningful to you? Why?

Which of the churches described is most like yours? How is it similar? How does it differ?

5. Take a guided tour of your church sanctuary or place of worship. (If this isn't possible, perhaps the group could draw a large scale diagram of the sanctuary floor plan.) What is the first thing you notice when you enter? The design and condition of a worship space says something about the people who worship there. What does your place of worship say about you?
6. If your church was burning and you could rescue only one thing out of the building, what would it be?

### Suggestions for the minister

This would be a good time to preach on the theology and perhaps a little on the history of worship. In many congregations, people have very little sense of why the worship follows a certain format or style. What do we do here and why do we do it? If the worship service is a kind of theatrical performance, who are the actors? Who is the coach? Who is the audience? Is the sermon the main thing? How do you go about preparing a service of worship? How do we know if we are worshippers or merely an audience?

## Chapter 4

# ALL WEEK LONG

1. Begin by asking people what the word “family” means to them. Has society’s concept of family changed over the last few years? In what way? Make a list of all the midweek activities and congregational events at your church. Is there a place for you in one of these groups? What other needs do you have that the church might help you meet? How could that happen?
2. Invite a number of people in your congregation to talk with your group about what goes on at your church during the week. You might include a member of the UCW and a member of a men’s group. What is their purpose? What do they do? How often do they meet?
3. Talk with the leader of the church. How is the church school set up? What curriculum is being used and why? What are the joys and problems of being involved in the church school? What do the children share with us?
4. Interview the choir leader. How do people in the choir see their role? How is the music chosen?
5. There are no doubt many other groups or activities in your church. There probably isn’t time enough to talk about all of them. Be ready with a list of names and phone numbers of various leaders, in case someone in your group would like to make contact with one of them.

## Suggestions for the minister

This might be a good opportunity to hold up the work of the whole church during the Sunday worship. Leaders of various groups within the church might offer very short presentations of who they are, why they exist, and what they do. This might be followed by a meditation community, interdependence, sharing, and the growth of faith in community.

## Chapter 5

# HATCHED, MATCHED, AND DISPATCHED

Again, you may wish to invite your worship committee to be part of this discussion. Obtain copies of the baptism, communion, marriage, and funeral services (if your congregation uses a standard order of service for these) from your minister and give them to participants at the beginning of the session. It's okay to photocopy for this purpose. (Note: You may well choose to divide this chapter into two or three sessions.)

1. Show a series of drawn or real symbols (e.g. maple leaf, a stop sign, a copyright symbol, a poison symbol, a handshake, two people hugging etc.). What meanings do these symbols convey? What are some other examples of symbols? Sometimes it is difficult to express our deepest feelings in words, so we use an action or symbol to express *those* feelings. We think of the sacraments in that way. These acts are symbols of spiritual truth and power. They are the "visible" Word.
2. Ask people if they have been baptized, and if so, where and how. What does baptism mean to them now? Do they feel the United Church is being too strict about baptism? Not strict enough?
3. Look at the baptismal service. Ask someone to read it aloud. What words do you find interesting? Bothering? Does any part of it inspire you? Make you angry? In what circumstances should the church refuse to baptize a baby? Why?
4. Ask people if they've been to a communion service lately. Did it have any meaning for them? Have they ever participated in a communion service in another church or another denomination?
5. Hand out copies of the communion service. Like baptism, communion is a ritual that goes back to biblical times. Jesus participated in both. When we symbolically reenact the Last Supper in communion, what are we saying? In most United Churches, the elements are ordinary bread and grape juice. How is this part of the symbolism? There are different ways of celebrating the Lord's Supper. Invite participants to share different ways that they have experienced communion. Which way does your congregation most often use? Why? Which way or ways were most meaningful to you? Why?
6. Communion speaks of a "new covenant." What is a covenant? What is "new" about this ancient symbol?
7. What covenants have you entered into in your life? Was there a token or symbol associated with them?
8. Marriage. Try to have some knowledge of where people in the group are in relation to marriage, and be aware of any sensitivities they may have. Do not assume that all couples living together are married. It might be wise to begin this discussion with a storytelling opportunity, where people are invited to say where they are and where they've been. Look together at the wedding service(s) used in your congregation. What commitments or covenant are the two people asked to make?
9. What is your congregation's policy on marriages and marriage preparation? What type and amount of marriage preparation is available? Does your church provide any help to those now married to enrich or strengthen their married life? Some participants may have been to a Marriage Enrichment or Marriage Encounter event. You might invite them to share some of that experience.

10. Funerals. This may be a difficult session because some members may be actively grieving or experiencing a loss and you will need to be sensitive to this.

Start the session by inviting people to share a personal experience they have had with death, or with the loss of someone or something very important in their lives. First, you may wish to share a personal experience that will help others to share theirs. The story you offer does not need to be about death; it could be about any loss that involves grief, such as divorce, a friend or family member moving away, the loss of a job, etc.

11. Together, look at the funeral service. Remember that some people, especially the younger ones, may never have been to a funeral service. Read some of the most significant portions out loud.
12. What is the difference between a funeral service and a memorial service? What makes a funeral or memorial service meaningful for you? Why?

### Suggestions to the minister

If you are developing a sermon about the topics in this chapter, you'll have a problem deciding what to leave out. Concentrating on communion as the central sacrament might solve that. Tracing its Hebrew roots in the Exodus story, and its Christian roots in the early church, might lead us to the question of what the sacrament is about now. Why do we bother? What are some of the symbols imbedded in the communion: the gathering around the table, the serving of each other, the significance of the bread and the wine or grape juice. Again, if there is a layperson who could, in a few words, describe what one or more of these celebrations meant to her or him, it would add a personal witness to the strength of the homily. And if communion can be served, that would be most fitting.

## Chapter 6

# TELLING THE NEW-OLD STORY

If your congregation has an outreach committee or evangelism committee, ask someone from that committee to come and participate in your discussion.

1. As the leader, why not begin with a few simple personal stories. Speak candidly and openly about how you are living your Christian convictions, and about how you communicate those to others. Ask if the participants know someone in your church or community who is communicating their faith. Gently, without pushing, ask the participants how they communicate the Christian good news.
2. Part of *telling* the story is *hearing* others' stories – really “*hearing*” what they are saying – and living out the concept of the caring community. Spend some time together discussing how to be a good listener. Here are some hints or tips: Try to get the other person to feel your support. Don't interrupt. Hear the whole story. Don't laugh unless you laugh with the other person.
3. Pass around a variety of resource materials about the United Church's mission work: various issues of *Mandate*, *The Observer*, material about local UCW projects, and a copy of your own congregation's annual report. Invite people to spend a bit of time looking at the material. Ask each person to choose a project that interests them and ask them to

tell the rest of the group about it. How does it tell the Christian story?

4. In what way does your congregation do its outreach? Thrift Shop? Food Bank? Other projects?
5. Are there people within your congregation who live their Christian convictions outside of the church – in politics, in the community, in their workplace?
6. How well does your congregation tell its story?
7. How well do I communicate my Christian faith? At work? At home? With friends? Why is this so difficult?
8. What does our congregational annual report, especially the budget, say about how we spread the Good News?

### Suggestions for the minister

Again, a layperson who can speak about their own outreach, or the outreach of a group within the church, would add considerably to any sermon on this subject. A sermon about why we need to do this, why it is that Christian faith doesn't really "take" until we consciously try to live it, would seem to be a valuable reflection on our mission. Again, if you can share some of your own struggles in this regard, that would be helpful.

## Chapter 7

# REVEREND SIR OR MADAM

1. You might begin this session by inviting your clergyperson to share with you why she or he chose to become a minister. What do we mean when we say someone is a "minister"? What do we mean by someone's "ministry"?
2. List some desirable characteristics of a minister. After you have a long list, cross out all those that are not absolutely essential. Discuss what you have left. Is it possible for one person to have all those qualities?
3. Discuss stereotypes of ministers – e.g. the perfect, "omni-competent," tranquil, scholarly, straitlaced, spiritual paragon of parental virtue. Do people in your congregation have any of the stereotypes in their heads?
4. What do you do when you discover that your minister is a human being with bad points and good points? How might members of a congregation cope with a minister's weaknesses? How do you support the minister then?
5. How might a congregation express its appreciation to its minister? How might a minister express appreciation to the congregation? How do we encourage each other in our Christian work?
6. What style of leadership do you find most effective? Could more than one style work equally well? Would this depend on circumstances? Encourage the group to give examples with their answers.

## Suggestions for the minister

This is the session, or Sunday if you are preaching on this theme, when the story of your call to ministry would be very helpful. Be sure to include the struggles and the setbacks and the difficulties. If you have other ordained or diaconal people on staff or in your congregation, they might be asked to share their stories as well. A sermon could end with a call to everyone to live the gospel.

## Chapter 8

# HOW WE DECIDE

1. Invite the chairperson of your church board, or another experienced board member, plus your presbytery representative to join you in this session. If possible, draw an organizational diagram of your congregation and display it on the wall of your meeting room.
2. Who is on your board? How do they get on the board? What committees are represented on the board? What are the functions of these committees?
3. How does an individual within the congregation express concerns? Are you heard when you have something to say about what happens in your local church? Why? Why not? What is the difference between "being heard" and "being agreed with"?
4. Who are your delegates to presbytery? How can an ordinary church member have a concern heard by the presbytery?
5. The United Church follows not only the democratic process, but also the collegial process. What does "collegial" mean in your congregation? What are the dangers of collegiality?
6. Much healing needs to take place in our church. What issues need healing in your local church? In our national church? Discuss how this might be accomplished without getting into debates on the issues themselves.

## Suggestions for the minister

The theology of decision-making could be the stuff of an excellent sermon. Some reflection on the legacy of the early church might be useful. Is there a “Christian” way of decision-making? Does this apply to secular politics? If secular politics is “the art of the possible” as some have observed, what is church politics? What happens when one person in a congregation has a strong sense of conviction that others do not share?

## Chapter 9

# MONEY

You may wish to invite the chairperson or an active member of the committee of stewards to join you for this session.

1. One way to get people to express their feelings on a touchy subject is to have them tell what others are saying. List some comments people have overheard about money and the church. An obvious one to start the ball rolling is, “Why is the church always asking for money?” Discuss these responses. Why is the question of money so touchy for so many of us?
2. Discuss what Jesus meant when he said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” How does this relate to our giving to the church?
3. Look at your own local church budget. How is it doing at this point in the year? Why are the givings up (or down) right now? Does our congregation spend its money wisely? What would you like to see happen?
4. What does our church budget say about what our church believes? How much do we spend on ourselves and how much do we spend on others? How important are children? Young people? Hurting people in our community?
5. Some people make a connection between their givings and their agreement with the local and national church policies, withholding money when they don’t agree with a decision or action made by the church, either locally or nationally. What is your view on this?

6. Look at the words you sing when the offering is brought forward in your weekly worship service. What do these words say? Do we mean them? Are you giving as much as you can? Do you see any need to? What do you receive from your giving?
7. Challenge people to go home and to quietly and prayerfully look at their cheque book and credit card statements, to see what those say about themselves, their values, and their faith. Be sure to tell them nobody is going to ask them to report on this.

### Suggestions for the minister

It's often really hard to preach about stewardship in your own congregation. We'd suggest, instead, that a sermon about money might be in order. What does money symbolize? What does it mean to us? It has been said that the game we play is called "Power," and money is the way we keep score. Why is it that we can discuss our sex life more easily than we can discuss the money we make and how we spend it? It might be helpful to ask someone, such as the chair of the stewardship committee, to talk for a few minutes about the congregation's stewardship.

## Chapter 10

# THIS WE BELIEVE

As you lead this session, encourage people to share differing views and beliefs. Avoid setting Ralph up as an "authority" with the "right" answer. Like all of us, Ralph is on a journey of faith and is learning as he moves. All we can do is share the bit of light we have at this moment. Consider having a copy of Ralph's book *God for Beginners* on hand. It was developed specifically as a response to those who read this chapter and wanted more.

1. Think back to your early childhood. What did you think God was like? Did you have a picture in your mind? (Leader should share first.) Have your ideas changed much over the years?
2. People think of God in a variety of ways: as a general, a coach, a computer hack, a cop, a rock star, a kindergarten teacher, a social worker, a parent, a lover, an artist. What is your reaction to these descriptions? How would you describe God? List all the words people have heard or used, to describe God. Do these do an adequate job? Can we describe God?
3. What does the United Church believe about Jesus? Look at the New Creed (*Voices United*, 918) to start this discussion. Read it out loud together. Why is this so important to our understanding of Jesus?
4. We believe Jesus was also uniquely God in human form. Why is this equally important to our understanding? What does the New Creed say Jesus' purpose on earth was? How

did he achieve this? What did Jesus show us? Why do we sometimes call ourselves an “Easter People”?

5. We talk about God as the Creator, God as the Son, and God as the Holy Spirit. How would you describe the Holy Spirit? Have you ever been aware of the Spirit of God in your life? How?
6. How do you feel about prayer? Many people never consciously stop and take time to specifically pray. Are there other ways of praying? What is the purpose of prayer?

### Suggestions for the minister

There’s so much in this chapter, it’s hard to know where to begin. If you want to preach on this chapter, we suggest beginning at the centre, with a sermon on Christology. However, we recommend that it not be a sermon on what you know of Christology, but as much as possible an account of your personal experience of Christ. If there are people in your congregation who have had experiences of the presence of Christ, you might ask them to tell their story.

## Chapter 11

# RIGHT, WRONG, AND MAYBE

It may be helpful to point out that this chapter, and Chapter 10, are very closely tied together. In that last chapter we looked at our beliefs. In this chapter we talk about how we *live* those beliefs.

1. In the New Creed (*Voices United*, 918) it says: “We are called...to seek justice and resist evil.” But who decides? How do we know what is just and what is evil? As a group, try to come up with a definition of justice and evil.
2. Many in the church feel the central questions must be, “Is it right? Does it serve the best interests of all of God’s creation?” Ralph describes three kinds of moral decision-making in our society: “Right’s right!” “Who cares?” and “The Jesus way.” Can you think of examples of the “right’s right” way? The “who cares” way? What is the “Jesus” way?
3. Think of an experience in your life when you learned that something you said or did was hurtful or harmful or even destructive. It might be helpful if you gave an example from your own experience. This might be an environmental action, a situation where a prejudice you weren’t even aware of surfaced, a justice issue to do with Native rights, etc. What made you realize this? How did you feel? What did you do? Did you change? What helped you change? What did it feel like to be different?

4. What were the consequences of this change in attitude or behaviour? Where you teased, ostracized, or even punished?
5. Ralph has touched on a lot of moral issues facing us today. Have the group choose one issue they'd like to think about. Apply the three methods of decision-making to the problem. Try to help people understand each other and the positions they come from. Try to get a sense of the complexity of these issues. It is *not* necessary that everyone agree.
6. What are a few of the most important moral issues you feel will confront us in this new millennium? Should the church as a whole be speaking out on these issues? What about your own congregation? What about you, personally? When the question "Does it serve the best interests of all creation?" is applied, does it change the perspective at all? How does "to love and serve others" come into it?
7. Where do we find strength for our own moral growth? How does the Holy Spirit come into this? Where does the Bible come into the process? How does the church help us in personal decisions?

### Suggestions for the minister

Again, there are any number of "handles" in this chapter that could work into a strong sermon. However, it might be most helpful to tell some stories, not of how social and justice problems are "solved," but of how people are creatively involved with being part of the solution. If these examples can spring from your own congregation, that would be best. But examples from the national scene can be found in *Mandate* or *The Observer*. And of course, stories out of your own experience are always strong. Again, there may be people in your congregation who could speak for a few minutes on this question.

## Chapter 12

# THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

During this last session, it is important for the group to gather up the threads of what they have been studying for the past weeks. This would be a good time for them to share the faith stories that hopefully have been growing over this time. The key question then becomes intensely personal. Why am *I* a Christian? Why do *I* bother? Why am *I* in this church? Everything else that follows in this session is designed to get at those primary questions.

Of course, it would also be nice to make this a kind of celebration. Food and laughter always go with celebration. Perhaps somewhere in this session, you could ask the participants to talk about what they have received from others in the group. And, as a leader, you might reflect on what each of the participants (be sure to include all of them) has given you.

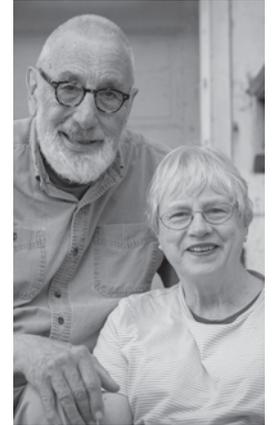
- What is it about this congregation that keeps you here?
- What is your own personal "faith hunger"? What is God calling you toward?
- We looked at the New Creed as one description of faith. What kinds of things would we put into a personal creed? Invite people to spend a few moments individually writing something of a personal statement of faith. If they feel comfortable doing so, people may share these with the group.
- Now that we know more about what the United Church is and what makes it tick, how are we going to share our faith journey and our feeling of belonging with others? Spend some time dreaming together about the future of your church.

## Suggestions for the minister

If some of the people in the study group are going to be baptized, confirmed, or transferred into your congregation, you might invite them to share the personal statements of faith developed in the last session, as part of the liturgy. You may invite others in the congregation to reflect on the personal question. And of course, it would be important that you, as the pastor of the congregation, share some more of your own faith journey, and your answer to the question, "Why bother?"

## THE AUTHOR

Dr. Ralph Milton is one of Canada's best-known religious communicators, and a recipient of an Honorary Doctorate of Sacred Letters from St. Stephen's College, Edmonton. He also has an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity from the Vancouver School of Theology. A former news broadcaster, open-line host and church administrator, Milton is the author of 17 books including the bestselling *Family Story Bible*; *Angels in Red Suspenders*; and *Julian's Cell*, a novel based on the life of Julian of Norwich. He recently produced a ground-breaking electronic hymnal, *Sing Hallelujah!* In retirement, Milton avidly pursues his hobby of creative photography and each week produces a series of slides to enhance the liturgy and the music at his home church, First United in Kelowna. Co-founder of Wood Lake Publishing, Ralph Milton lives in Kelowna, British Columbia, with his wife and friend of 50 years, Beverley, a retired United Church minister. Together, they remain the ever-proud grandparents of Zoë and Jake.



### OTHER BOOKS BY RALPH MILTON

PUBLISHED BY WOOD LAKE

The Family Story Bible

Angels in Red Suspenders

God for Beginners

Is This Your Idea of a Good Time, God?

Julian's Cell

Man to Man

Sermon Seasonings

The Essence of Julian

Lectionary Story Bible, 3 volumes

The Spirituality of Grandparenting