

# COMMEMORATE EMANCIPATION SUNDAY

## Council of Action: 44<sup>th</sup> General Council

### 1. What is the issue?

We believe Jesus is calling the General Council to name the first Sunday of August to be observed as Emancipation Sunday throughout The United Church of Canada.

### 2. Why is this issue important?

Slavery was fully abolished in Canada (British North America) by an act of the British Parliament which came into force on August 1, 1834. With that act it meant that no human being could be owned by another in Canada. This also meant that there was an implicit acknowledgement that this was but the beginning of a journey that we as a nation continues. August 1 is an important date in the history of Canada and the significance of the date should be remembered and acknowledged annually.

The Judeo-Christian scripture makes clear that remembering is an important action for the people of God. The scripture also places importance on the commemoration of some historic events. The need to remember and commemorate is two-fold. It calls on us to remember the redemptive love of God in specific events of the past, and it is also an opportunity to celebrate the continuing redemptive work of God to oppose the things that enslaves us. It is in this regard, for example, that we note the words of Moses to the people of God in the book of Deuteronomy.

The call of Jesus to his disciples, on the night before he was betrayed, that they should break bread and drink the cup in remembrance of him continues the call of remembering. In this regard the word remembrance used denotes a recognition of an event or person to be commemorated. Specifically in the context of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we recall the work of Jesus and more so his sacrificial death.

Our Christian tradition makes a priority of remembering as it enables the faithful handing on of truth (*paradosis*) from one generation to the next. This *paradosis* enables the next generation to face the realities of the past and not simply to "cherry-pick" those parts which may be preferred to hear. It is regrettable that in Canada the fact that the enslavement of Black people occurred in British North America is either ignored or forgotten. Many persons will today express surprise when this fact is told. In tandem with this reality is the pervading narrative that British North America was only involved in slavery was a refuge for those who escaped from enslavement in the United States of America. The enslavement of Africans did not occur in the large numbers as it occurs in the British colonies to our south. However, in all instances this was chattel slavery where Black people were stripped of their inherent humanity and treated as objects to be bought and sold, owned, and treated in inhuman and brutal ways.

This absence of remembering makes it difficult for a wholesome discussion of the legacies of slavery in Canada and the ways in which systemic racism continues to exist in the country. A failure to acknowledge this part of our history fails to take into consider the reality in our history of segregated schools, discrimination in housing and employment and the use of immigration rules to negatively discriminate against Black people.

In October 2020, the 44<sup>th</sup> General Council of declared that The United Church of Canada is becoming an ant-racist church. Part of the process of becoming anti-racist includes a willingness to confront with

humility those parts of our history which are painful and full of hurt as they display evidence of racism. An annual observance of the day of Emancipation will not immediately solve the issues cited above. However, it will be more than a symbolic step. It will begin, at least within the church, an acknowledgement to face bravely the full truth of the history of Canada and the continuation of a spirit of maturity within the society.

The prophetic role of the church makes it incumbent on the church to proclaim the vision of the rule of God in the hearts of people. This is a vision for righteousness, justice, truth, and love. The prophetic role of the church also seeks for healing of the historic hurts and to work towards reconciliation. The church has the responsibility to not to uphold a “false hope” based on a skewed narrative but to hold up hope, righteousness, and love; love that calls on all to face truth.

### **3. How might the Regional Council or General Council respond to the issue?**

The Northern Spirit Regional Council could propose to the 44<sup>th</sup> General Council.

- a) to set the first Sunday in August each year to be observed as Emancipation Sunday in The United Church of Canada
- b) to encourage Communities of Faith and regional councils to share worship resources and liturgies that have been developed for this event.

**Origin:** First United Church, Fort Saskatchewan Community of Faith.

**Regional Council Action:** Northern Spirit Regional Council agreed with the Proposal and will pass it on to the 44<sup>th</sup> General Council for action.