

Paul Clark of the *Dalhousie Gazette* interviewed the Right Reverend Dr. Lois Wilson, the new moderator of the United Church of Canada, during the church's 28th General Council held this August at Dalhousie University. Gerard Walsh assisted in the transcription of this interview.

**Gazette:** Dr. Wilson since its formation in 1925 out of several prominent Canadian Churches the United Church has striven to be a uniting church taking in new congregations and denominations under its wing. What's the philosophy underlying this drive to grow and expand?

**Wilson:** I think that it's two things. One is a theological reason, being that we believe ourselves called to unity in Christian faith and historically of course we've inherited the kind of fractured body so that theologically our disposition has always been to unity in Christ.

The second reason though is the geography of Canada. We've inherited the particular church of every immigrant group that has come to our country. When the English came they brought the Church of England, when the Scotch came they brought the Presbyterian Church, when the Germans came they brought the Lutheran Church, and this has continued so that every immigrant group has brought their own divisions of the church. You drop that kind of divisiveness into a huge country and it just doesn't wash. For example, in the early 1930s on the prairies you could have 14 Protestant churches in a community of 300 people. It became obvious for very practical reasons that neighbors didn't want to be divided by neighbours and fracture their community because of an historic division in Europe. This is evidenced by the fact that our church came into being in 1925 there were the local union churches on the prairies which presented very practical reasons for the United Church coming into being.

**Gazette:** There's been a little talk around, I'm thinking for example of an article I read in *MacLean's* about a while back about the United Church, that the church is really divided right now due to warring conservative and liberal forces. Do you think this is in fact true and do you think there is any hope of a resolution to this infighting?

**Wilson:** I think it's a strong vocal minority who would be the conservative element within the church who would be extremely upset about some of the policies and some of the stances that the church might take. I think, however, that this is not all only in the United Church. I think the division within the Christian community at this point in history is not between denominations, that is, it is not between the United Church and Anglican and Catholic and so on. The division is rather

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between I suppose it could be called those who would understand faith as a privatized affair and who would retreat into a Noah's Ark in terms of the world we live in and those who understand faith as faith and I would put myself in this category.

Faith as faith has to do by its very nature with the human condition, human interrelationships, the reality of the world we live in, including the natural world. If there is anything that faith does it propels one who realistically enters the world that we live in and does not permit one to pull aside. That makes for division and the further one is propelled into the reality of the world we live in the more it upsets those who theologically believe that faith really has to do more with one's private life, one's faith in God, one's feelings, one's happiness and does not have to do, for example, with ecology or nuclear weapons or our relationships to South Africa and some of those very divisive issues which I think are faith issues.

**Gazette:** How does the United Church stand with respect to the Canadian Church community in terms of being a socially conscience church? Do you think it is a lot more socially conscious than other churches or do you think it stands somewhere in the middle?

**Wilson:** I think we have the reputation of being out front in many areas, but we're able though to move in concert with some of our colleagues

# The new United Church moderator speaks out

on most of the major social issues and we try as much as we're able to work in concert with them. I'm speaking here of some of the coalitions that we have in the church around social issues, for example, Project North. Five of the major churches, including the Catholic Church, the Anglicans, the Lutherans and the United Church, have come to work together on behalf of native people and we tend to work on social issues in this kind with whatever of our colleagues of our member churches we're able to work with by common consent. So I would think that's the situation. Mind you the Anglicans have taken the lead in terms of the social issues concerning native people and we have supported them, in other areas the Quakers, the Society of Friends, have taken the lead in terms of disarmament and we have supported them. We tend to work in a fairly good collegial fashion.

**Gazette:** How do you stand with respect to some of the churches in the United States? In the university community a lot of us, if anything, would accuse religious people in Canada of being a little medieval, in the sense of being concerned with trifles, with private, subjective moral issues, whereas in the U.S., from my perspective anyways, there is a different sort of thing occurring. Churches there seem to be very worldly in that they seem to wholeheartedly embrace an indulgent American way of life. Do you think that's a fair characterization and what kind of relationship does your church have with the churches in the U.S.?

**Wilson:** Now are you speaking about the electronic church in the U.S.? You know the ones that come on and they want to save your soul but they also have there hands out for some money.

**Gazette:** I guess so.

**Wilson:** Our church would have some very critical questions to raise about the electronic church, our main image of the churches in the U.S., which tends as you say to really reinforce the narcissism of our society and the turning in and the "think about me" syndrome. On the other hand, there are some very strong outward looking churches in the U.S., for example, the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., and I think it's the African Episcopal Church which is a fully black church in the U.S.A. It was from this church that Martin Luther King drew the strength of his marchers when he was protesting with the garbage workers. So you know it's a mixed two. I don't think you can

make a sweep and say this or that, but certainly about the electronic church I and my church would have some really very critical questions to raise. I guess we would put them in the category, if you put people in categories, of those who understand faith as having to do only and mainly with the privatized life.

**Gazette:** How do you feel about Billy Graham? **Wilson:** Well, I can't understand how Billy Graham can keep churning out the same stuff year after year and retain any, well, any sense of liveliness. I've not followed his lately but I have the feeling that in his time he has become more socially conscious than when he began. But I have some critical questions to raise about his whole interrelationship with Nixon, for example, and blessing the status quo.

**Gazette:** Dr. Kerry Anderson began the first working day of the conference with a speech saying "The way we are called to walk in the

future will be increasingly divergent from the broad path of our general society. The way will neither directly oppose nor endorse the way of our culture. It will be much more complex."

**Wilson:** I think what he had in mind is that certainly the United Church of Canada is becoming less and less what we used to call a mainline church. We're becoming more of a minority within Canadian culture, so that there is the phenomena of a shrinking membership, but that's not precisely what I think we had in

mind. What I think he was meaning is we are more and more realizing that to be faithful to the Christian gospel means an increasing diversion from the mainstream of Canadian life and the mainstream of how we do things in Canada.

**Gazette:** Could you be a little more specific? **Wilson:** One thing that comes to mind immediately is the whole phenomenon of tourism that we have. I mean is it necessary, for example, to buy luxury tours? Or is a

### We live on an island in Canada and therefore run the risk of being very parochial in our thinking.

simpler lifestyle in order? **Gazette:** I remember seeing a quote from one of your seminars. Somebody was speaking about advertising within our society and talking about the way advertising contains a lot of sexism and a lot of encouragement to buy material objects. It contains a sort of impulse to develop false needs. Do you think that's an example of the divergence path that society is following from the church?

**Wilson:** Yes, that's another area and all of us in Canada of course are caught up in this. I'm speaking only now my own constituency to say that more and more so we're understanding that we really need to dissent from the consumer society, from the consumerism that is around, and we are in no better position than anyone else to do that.

It seems to me also that Canadian society is a deeply racist society, although we have some who tend to deny this and feed each other myths about how broad minded we are and that we certainly aren't as bad as those

individuals in fact living a simpler and or more natural lifestyle than the average Canadian?

**Wilson:** No, we aren't. We all have two cars and three boats and a snowmobile and two bikes. No, we aren't and that's precisely the issue. But I think at least we're at the point now where we're taking it on as a faith issue and unless there's some coming together there's no integrity either in our personhood or in our faithfulness to the gospel.

**Gazette:** Let me get onto another subject that's

quite controversial and that's the church's report on human sexuality. As I understand it, the report covers three general areas. It covers homosexuality, adultery and abortion. What these three issues?

**Wilson:** Well, I guess I have to say that the report is an attempt for one of the first times I know to set the whole issue of sexuality some kind of biblical context. The thing is called "In God's Image—A Report on Human Sexuality" and so we would hope to develop our understanding of sexuality in the context of biblical faith and tradition which hasn't been done for some time. I'm thinking here, for example, of the pill and the kind of sexual independence that is given women and the economic independence that is given along with that. You've got the whole sexual relationship in a whole new context now. That's really what we're struggling at: to attempt to help our church constituency and others think through matters relating to sexuality in a new way.

years. And one of the things we're trying to say in the report is that our society does two things to sexuality, both of them in my judgement a distortion about of what "In God's Image" is about. One is to romanticize the relationship between the sexes just all out of sight, so that its not realistic at all, and the other is to make the claim that genital sex is the final intimacy and that unless you're into that with kind of everybody around, then you haven't really lived. So you buy these books how to and so on, which I think is again a distortion of where the wholeness of human sexuality lies. The report is an attempt to say to our Christian community might there be an alternate model of human sexuality that we can lift up, which has to do with what it is to be a loving person. You know, what does it mean to really love? And so despite your sexual orientation do you know what it means to love and to relate to people, perhaps in different ways? And I think that within that question, well, it's the old good Samaritan question, "Who is my neighbor and how can I love her or him? We then discuss

abortion, homosexuality, adultery, all those basic human relationships, so the report is a study document and I think a very good one. Some people will think that its ten years too late or out of date and others will think it's very avant garde, and ten years ahead. That's OK, it's a useful document and I'm really glad that the thing is public and that we're able finally to have some very frank and honest discussion in that area.

**Gazette:** What can you say to those non-believers who urge us to concentrate on social reforms, claiming all this religious stuff is just kind of narcissistic and time could be better spent constructing a better society than devoting your life to God? How can the United Church respond to those kinds of people?

**Wilson:** I guess I've said our understanding of faith in our tradition has been that faith really directs us into the social milieu and has to do with the relationships between people. It was

people of secular faith or who might come from quite strong political positions. If in fact we can meet in that middle range of values which has to do with human relationships then we'll go, however, what we think we bring with that is always the ability to stand over against in a critical stance.

The kingdom is never going to be here in terms of social reforms, there will always need to be something else happen. For example, when I went to Cuba when I met with the Christians in Cuba who have, for example, achieved many of the social goals which the church here still strives for, my question to them was still, "Why are you not critical still of the government in your country and some of the social programs? Have you lost your faith stance and your ability to be critical of even some of the very good achievements?"

**Gazette:** Then when Marx said that religion was the opium of the people, was he talking about a different religion?

**Wilson:** No, and I think that he was talking out of a historical situation which was certainly valid and I must say in many instances, I see religion used as an opium of the people. I mean some people use religion as a comfort blanket, as something to protect them from the rigors of the reality of the world and in that sense some people do use it as opium, I'm sorry to say. **Gazette:** Is this just a lower level of worship or something like that, would you say?

**Wilson:** It's an expectation that religion will protect you from the evils of the world that we live in and there is a sense in which faith as faith enables us to live our lives with it. That's a valid kind of comfort, provided it doesn't remove us from creative interaction with other people and from the societal problems that face us.

**Gazette:** Your church has recently been doing a lot of work with other Canadian coalitions protesting human right violations in Latin America and other countries too. What kind of a role do you think the Canadian government and Canadians as well can take with respect to countries like Guatemala or El Salvador or Argentina or Chile where this kind of violent repression occurs daily?

**Wilson:** Well, I think we need to look at the connections between Canada and some of these countries. It's the connections that are important. In other words, are there particular activities or decisions made in Canada which contribute to the regimes in those countries which dispossess people and violate human rights? I'm speaking here of economic ties and other kinds of things which prop up those regimes.

But the second thing I'd like to say is that we need also to look internally in Canada for the human rights violations of persons in our own country and that's equally important.

**Gazette:** As new moderator of the United Church do you have any sort of concrete goals in mind? Any directions you'd like to see the church go in the next couple of years?

**Wilson:** Yes, one of the very strong directions which I've worked for for some years, but perhaps can give some more visibility through the office, is that not only the Canadian church but also Canada must understand and begin to make its decision and priorities within some international context. You know not that we simply know what's going on in the world, but what does that say to us then in terms of the

you personally feel about that, do you think that you've been elected as a sort of token woman? Do you think this is some kind of an indication of a growing emancipation among women and do you still think there's a long way to go?

**Wilson:** I think I was not elected as a token woman, because my track record in the church was well known, my commitment to social issues, my initiation dialogue, for example, with people of other faiths, my work with the implications of Christian faith for international tourism. Some of these things were well known. I think it's been fortuitous that I happen also to be a woman and there was certainly great joy that in fact, finally, a woman has been elected. Our church has a fifty-five year old history and since half the human race are female—it was long past time and there was recognition of that by both men and women. I think the fact that I happen to be a woman will give a fair amount of visibility, then, to the issues surrounding the changing roles of men and women and I intend fully to press those.

A valid school of theology these days is feminist theology and these are folk who, both men and women, who are really re-interpreting the biblical story through quite different eyes than the traditional male culture and tradition out of which the biblical story came and there are some very interesting insights there in terms of the changing roles of men and women and the kind of world we live in. And I think that will get high visibility because of the office I happen to be in. Again you see that what I'm concerned about is that issue, the issue of the changing role of men and women, be viewed or the discussion to take place in the context of the world. Women in most of the world really get the short end of the stick.

I would like to see the church in solidarity with women at the bottom of any given society. In Canada this would be women of native descent or immigrant women. I think the middle class woman can perhaps look after herself and knows the rules of the game, but it's the women at the bottom who are in double jeopardy: they're not only women, but also they're the wrong colour or the wrong class and that's where we really have to go to bat.

**Gazette:** Ever since the start of the 20th century and even before that there has been a growing separation of the church and universities, much as two or three centuries before that there was a separation between church and state. Do you think this is a good thing and what do you think the proper role of the church within the university is?

**Wilson:** Whether it is a good thing or not it's happening. In many ways I think it is a good thing. I really view the church's role in any given society to be the hopefully the raiser of critical questions about the life of that society and, to the extent that we're able, the initiator of new thrusts in a given society's life. And certainly at one point in the history of Canada, education there was a major thrust of all the major churches, Catholic and Protestant; and every major university in Canada owes its life to that beginning. But once that is launched, then the secular state takes that over and then it seems to me the church is freed up to initiate in areas where the state is either not aware or is unable to initiate. I think that the role of the religious community vis a vis the university

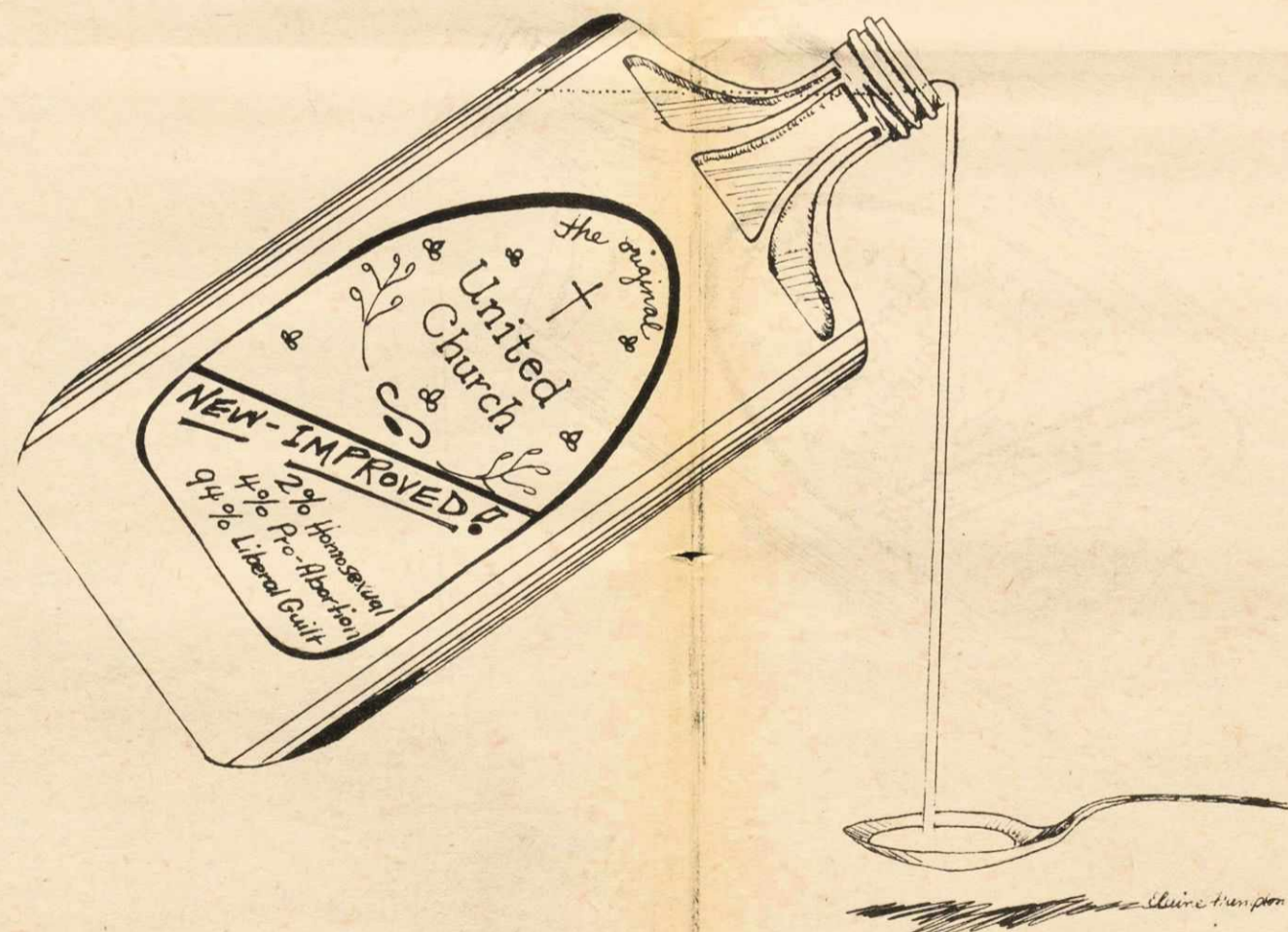
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decisions that we are making here? It may be already almost too late to do that and I think it's just too priority. You see, we live on an island in Canada, it's a rather large island, but it is an island and therefore we run the risk of being extremely parochial in our thinking. In many other parts of the world they don't have the same huge geographic spread of country and therefore they are in interaction with other cultures, with other traditions, other faiths, other political philosophies. On a day to day basis in Canada we're not.

**Gazette:** You're the first woman to be elected moderator of the United Church and I hear a lot made of it in the press and elsewhere. How do

these days is to keep raising the critical questions "What is a university?" Is a university a place where 2,000 students are herded into a place to get lectures by TV with absolutely no interaction with the professor and with each other? I mean does learning take place in that context? And what are the values which we really need to reclaim for the university? In what sense is a university a community and in what sense is a community absolutely necessary? For learning to take place I think that's the role of the religious community vis a vis the universities.

**Gazette:** Thank you very much. **Wilson:** Thanks, it was fun talking to you.



Americans, are we? You can wear your maple leaf and everybody will know you're pure. But I think we are deeply racist and it shows itself in very subtle ways. It seems to be me that's another area from which the church can diverge from the mainstream of our society. It's not the most popular thing in the world to oppose racism, but we're becoming increasingly aware that may be one of the ways in which we need to diverge.

**Gazette:** Let me ask you, then, are you as

I'd like to say that I think that our society is just extremely confused in the whole matter of sexuality. It's one of the signs of the entire confusion of values and many, many people are getting extremely hurt in this whole process. I think of my own age group and the numbers of couples that have suddenly come to the realization that "oh, I don't have to live with this person for the rest of my life so I think that I'll get a divorce." Apparently it has never occurred to them and one wonders what the quality of that relationship has been for 30

John Wesley you know who saw the world as his parish and it was Stanley Knowles who went into parliament. Our church work in what I would call social partnership with other groups of people or individuals who do not show our faith basis but who share our ethical basis on issues such as nuclear weapons or the care of the earth, ecology. It's not our concern where the faith basis of people is if, now don't pervert that, if we're talking about societal problems. So we work with people who have a quite different faith basis, who are Bahai or