

A Holy Union

Eighty years ago, the United Church was created when Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists merged. Now they're looking at a union of another kind. By Paul Wilson

THESE DAYS, the term "clergy abuse" conjures up ugly images of priests molesting children and mainstream churches torn by lawsuits and inner turmoil. But to Reverend K.D. (Casey) McKibbin, a 67 year old retired United Church minister, the term refers not to sexual deviants, but to ministers faced with what he calls clergy killers – factions within congregations that make their ministers' lives hell. McKibbin, who runs the Clergy Support Network and the website clergyabuse.net, talks with the blunt air of a man who's seen it all. "The world is full of broken-down clergy," he says. For years, he's been advocating a radical solution: unionization. In the United Church, some ministers claim that as many as 18 per cent of the roughly 2,400 active ministers are on stress leave, though church data put that number far lower. It's clear that the problem is widespread, with ministers commonly facing economic hardship, invasions of privacy, mental and physical abuse, even sexual harassment. In one case, police advised a minister to leave town to escape an enamoured congregant who'd been stalking him. The seeds of conflict can range from a theological mismatch (a conservative minister serving a liberal congregation, or vice versa) to something more petty – and typical – like a new minister unwittingly offending an important congregant. It takes only 10 parishioners to force the dreaded "three sixty-three" – a review of a minister's performance, as prescribed by Section 363 in the United Church Manual. And though the presbyteries – the church's regional governing bodies – can over turn a congregation's decision, this rarely happens, and the minister can be subject to retraining, psychiatric examination, suspension or even dismissal, all without due process. The problem is simple, McKibbin says. Ministers "have no protection before the law. When push comes to shove, they have no rights. Enter the union." Last November, that's exactly what happened: a small group of United Church ministers announced a drive to unionize under the auspices of the Canadian Autoworkers Union – one of Canada's largest and most militant unions, with 260,000 members. Clergy unions already exist in the U.K. and Scandinavia, but not in North America, so the initiative stirred a flurry of media attention. The church responded quickly. Jim Sinclair, general secretary of the church's general council, issued a statement that said: "Trade unions do good work for society, but they are not a good fit for the United Church clergy." The agreement between a minister and the church, he continued, is not "contractual," but "covenantal." It's a hairsplitting distinction that underpins the church's claim: ministers are not employees, and so are ineligible for union membership. CAW president Buzz Hargrove disagrees: "We are convinced that the United Church is an employer and that the ministers are employees of the United Church." And so the battle lines are drawn. Since November, organizers have been holding information and recruiting sessions across Ontario. Many church members and clergy worry that a powerful labour union coexisting with the self-governing church will have far-reaching consequences. Organizer Karen Paton-Evans reassures them: "Of course it's groundbreaking. But, hey, we're the United Church. That's what we do." If organizers garner support from more than 50 per cent of Ontario's

1,200 practicing United Church ministers by the fall, then the CAW will step in. “We would ask the leadership of the United Church to deal with us on a voluntary basis,” Hargrove says. If the historically pro-union church resists the drive, however, “the church hierarchy and the clergy would have to go through a legal battle as to whether the clergy had rights [as employees], and we think that would be totally out of line with the social message the United Church is trying to present.” Such a battle could go to the Supreme Court, radically altering the way Canada’s largest Protestant denomination conducts its affairs. Though the number of clergy who have so far applied for union membership is not public, Hargrove is cautiously optimistic. Organizers, he says, “have an uphill battle. This is a whole new concept for clergy...but the enthusiasm of these people, and the issues that they raise with me – if those are fairly widespread, then I would think they’d be successful.” For the ministers bullied by clergy killers, this drive can’t proceed quickly enough. Another organizer, Rev. David Galston of Hamilton, Ontario, thinks that a union could provide much needed protection for ministers. “I hope the CAW could bring pressure on the church to eliminate Section 363,” he said. “It’s illegal and it shouldn’t be there.” Meanwhile, Casey McKibbin is watching sympathetically from the sidelines. “This is not about getting better pay, or better this or better that,” he says. “The first thing clergy need is protection in their jobs, so they can stand up on Sunday and speak the truth as they see it....What I would hope is that the gospel would be rediscovered and proclaimed.”