



**Online Hate:
A Submission to the Justice and Human Rights
Committee of the Parliament of Canada**

The United Church of Canada

09 May 2019



What we believe

Since its foundation in 1925, the United Church of Canada has worked to build a community of love, compassion and understanding that is inclusive, welcoming and diverse. We at the United Church of Canada are deeply concerned by the spread of hate online and its consequences within our faith communities and beyond.

We believe that we are called to love each other as God loves us. We believe that hate, in all its forms, is a rejection of the dignity of creation and of God's loving grace. We also believe that love for the whole community of creation is a universal value, shared by all peoples of the world. The United Church of Canada works tirelessly to live into this commitment. We support ecumenical and interfaith initiatives towards just peace, right relations, and economic justice in Canada and around the world, through organizations such as the World Council of Churches, the Canadian Council of Churches, KAIROS and the Canadian Interfaith Conversation.

We believe that God's love embraces everyone, regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity. Discrimination, hate and incitement sow division, fear and distrust, fracturing the wholeness of humanity. We seek to live out this commitment in our own communities. In 1988, the United Church of Canada extended full inclusion to its gay and lesbian members, recognizing their right to admission as ministers and leaders within the Church. In the decades since, we have worked towards the full inclusion of LGBTQIA2S+ people within our communities and in Canadian society, including testimony before this committee in 1999 in support of the equality of same-sex and heterosexual couples.

We believe that the gift of speech allows all humanity to grow into the love that is the basis of our shared humanity. Hate seeks to replace hope with despair, diversity with conformity, inclusion with exclusion and dialogue with conflict. We recognize the importance of meaningful dialogue as the only means to shared understanding, even when it leads to finding fault with the Church itself. In 1986, the United Church of Canada recognized its role in the oppression of Indigenous culture in Canada in the Apology to Indigenous Peoples, reaffirmed in the 1998 Apology to United Church Indian Residential Schools. We continue to support the work of Indigenous peoples in our faith communities and the broader communities towards the recognition of Indigenous rights and self-determination, including our adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and our support of Bill-C262.

This commitment to meaningful dialogue is consistent with The United Church's support for democratic rights and freedoms enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which include the right of citizens to engage in constructive critique of both Canadian as well as foreign governments. The United Church of Canada stands in solidarity with groups and individuals exercising this right in nonviolent, peaceful ways.



What is the problem?

Online platforms have made it easier than ever for people from all walks of life to come to know in each other and share in the joy of community. At the same time, online platforms are being used to spread fear, violence and hate. We feel the effects of hate every day both in the headlines and in our communities.

- The United Church of Canada is proud of its inclusive communities that welcome peoples of all sexual orientations and gender identities as full members and ordered ministers. Because of this, our communities are frequently the target of hate motivated by religious intolerance, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia. Just this week, a social media announcement of celebration of LGBTQ2IA2S+ ministry led by an indigenous, two-spirit minister was flooded with hateful posts from Canada and abroad. Our communities have no recourse but to delete messages and block users. These attackers do not seek to express a viewpoint or engage in dialogue, but to intimidate and to silence.

Today, the principle of free expression is used to defend those who would suppress dialogue on online platforms. But, expression is not an end in itself. The gift of speech serves the end of dialogue and understanding. Hate, incitement and provocation aim to degrade the space of civic discourse, to create division, to turn respect into contempt and replace understanding with ideology. The goal of hate is not speech, but the silencing of those without the power to be heard.

- In May 2018, the peaceful Great March of Return ended with bloodshed. The United Church of Canada spoke up in support of the right to peaceful protest (<https://www.united-church.ca/news/gaza-no-one-should-be-killed-peacefully-protesting>) echoing the calls of partners: mourning the dead, condemning violence, and asking the Canadian government to take an international leadership role in just peace in the region. Our plea for dialogue was met with hateful, Islamophobic content aimed both at the Church and its ecumenical partners. Viciously prejudicial comments and imagery were posted in an effort to incite hatred and contempt of the Church and partners portraying, among other things, all 1.9 million people in Gaza (including children, medics and journalists) as terrorists. These attacks served no purpose other than to demean and degrade communities, justifying further violence rather than furthering the cause of peace.

While online platforms help us to share ideas and experiences in ways never before imagined, they have also enabled - and profited from - the proliferation of hate. Online platforms have made it easier to spread hate by lowering the social and financial costs of inciting hatred. They have provided assailants with the cloak of anonymity and the shield of impunity. They have made it easier to target those already facing systemic discrimination, and have helped to promote divisive, deceptive and hateful content through algorithms designed to make controversial content more visible. At the same time, online platforms have profited from the real and tangible harms that hate has caused to our communities.



- Last year, a summer camp supported by the United Church of Canada was the target of online hate. Rainbow Camp is a safe space for young LGBTQIA2S+ people who face normalized discrimination to be recognized for who they are. Just days before campers were to arrive, credible threats of a mass shooting at the camp were posted on a related social media page. An investigation by the Ontario Provincial Police proved the threats to be hollow, but the impacts on the camp and its campers were all too real. These young people were targeted by threats of anonymous violence in an effort to silence voices that are already marginalized in our communities. Our campers deserve better.

There is no boundary between a 'real' world and a 'virtual', no division between this world and a digital world without consequence or reality. Hate – online or in any form – is proof that Canadian society is failing to build communities of love and understanding that address systemic forms of discrimination and inequality. Hate is a symptom, not a cause, of the collective failure to address these inequities, understand differences and find the common roots of shared humanity. Hate online spills out into our communities because violence, not understanding, is its natural endpoint. The United Church of Canada is deeply concerned that hate is being used to victimize not just those who are targeted by it, but also those who through innocence or carelessness are corrupted by it.

What should Canada do about it?

We recognize that government alone cannot solve the growing problem of online hate. Government must work together with communities of faith, civic institutions and public leaders to help create an environment in which all Canadians can enjoy the right to meaningful dialogue. However, much can be done today.

The United Church of Canada calls on the Justice and Human Rights Committee of the Parliament of Canada to consider legislative changes that name online hate for what it is. While it is a criminal act to incite violence against others, it is an act against the dignity of all humanity to incite hatred, fear and contempt on discriminatory grounds. Too often, the victims of hate are already targets of normalized discrimination. When we fail to call hate by its name, we fail also to name the systemic discrimination that gives it legitimacy. We therefore also call on the Justice Committee to reflect on how ethical standards of dignity and respect are upheld by members of parliament as elected representatives and civic leaders.

We also call on the Justice Committee of the Parliament of Canada to consider legislative changes that shift the costs of online hate away from its victims. Again and again, those targeted by hate have defended themselves from attacks with patience, compassion and understanding, and been rewarded with contempt, threats and violence. Those who incite hatred in its explicit and implicit forms must also share in the burden of these attacks, and not be shielded by a false appeal to freedom of speech or anonymity. Service providers must also recognize the role that they continue to play in enabling, fostering and profiting from the spread of hate. Such amendments should consider naming the intended



and unintended harms of hate as it affects the lives of those in our communities and the quality of our shared public discourse.

At the United Church of Canada, we recognize that we all have an important role to play in shaping a civic life that is free from hate, where all are welcome to seek understanding and recognition with dignity and respect. We are committed to promoting the right of every person to speak, to be heard, and to be understood in an environment free from fear, intimidation, and the threat of violence.

The United Church of Canada

The United Church of Canada is the largest Protestant denomination in Canada. We minister to over 2 million people in about 3,000 congregations. The history of the United Church is closely entwined with the history of Canada itself.

The United Church was inaugurated on June 10, 1925 in Toronto, Ontario, when the Methodist Church, Canada, the Congregational Union of Canada, and 70 per cent of the Presbyterian Church of Canada entered into a union. Also joining was the small General Council of Union Churches, centred largely in Western Canada. It was the first union of churches in the world to cross historical denominational lines and received international acclaim. Each of the founding churches had a long history in Canada prior to 1925. The movement for church union began with the desire to coordinate ministry in the vast Canadian northwest and for collaboration in overseas missions. Congregations in Indigenous communities from each of the original denominations were an important factor in the effort toward church union.

The United Church continues to be a "uniting" church, and has been enriched by several additional unions since 1925. In 1930, the Synod of The Wesleyan Methodist Church of Bermuda became part of The United Church of Canada's Maritime Conference. The Evangelical United Brethren Church became part of The United Church of Canada in 1968. In addition, various individual congregations from other Christian communions have become part of the United Church over the years.