

Church ministers consider a union

'If we remain silent about the situations we find ourselves in, they just continue'

By Sharon Boase
The Hamilton Spectator
 (Mar 15, 2007)

A Hamilton United Church minister once "devastated" by shoddy treatment by congregants is among a growing number of clergy willing to go public over their support for a controversial union drive.

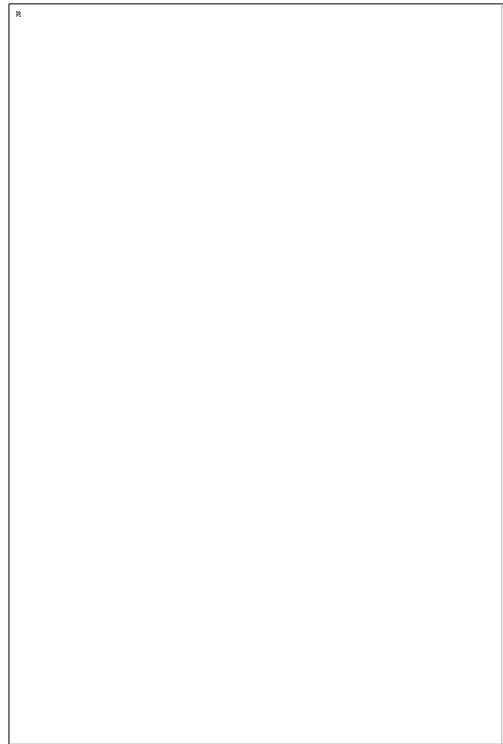
Rev. Robert Matton, now pastor at Binbrook and Blackheath United churches, is one of a dozen United Church clergy featured in a documentary on Vision TV last night about the Canadian Auto Workers contentious bid to include clergy in their rank and file.

The program airs again Monday.

Hamilton pastor Dr. David Galston, an organizer behind the drive, says Matton is just one of dozens more clergy members across Ontario so frustrated with their working conditions they're no longer willing to keep quiet.

"The overwhelming number of conflicts in pastoral care result in the departure of the minister," Matton told The Spectator. "We need a union, somebody who is going to advocate on behalf of ministry people because the church has failed to show it can deal equitably with conflict."

Matton, 53, said he thought his term as pastor to a United Church in Acton was quite successful. Yet, after overseeing construction of an addition and ushering in a number of new, young families, a member of a presbytery committee said he'd be best off to leave.



Gary Yokoyama, the Hamilton Spectator

Rev. Robert Matton believes a union would improve working conditions.

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"It just sucked the life right out of me," Matton said of the experience. After a subsequent posting that was no better, he left the ministry for 18 months.

"If we all remain silent about the situations we often find ourselves in, they just continue," Matton said.

The CAW launched its unprecedented drive to organize clergy two years ago after being approached by a handful of ministers, including Galston who is pastor at Eternal Spring United Church on the Mountain.

So far, they haven't garnered the 60 per cent support among Ontario clergy they're aiming for, but Galston said he expects that to change.

"It's not about the money or, as the joke goes, getting weekends off," Galston said. Over and over, he and his fellow organizers hear about conflicts within a congregation that are resolved by pushing the minister out.

Typically, conflicts stem from attempts to jazz up worship services and draw new blood into a congregation -- tasks ministers are often assigned when they are hired.

All it takes is a group of 10 malcontents to trigger a review of a minister's job performance, Galston said. Typically, it's the minister who's taken to task, not the congregation. "Even if the minister is wrong, you need a system that can legitimately prove that and ensure the minister isn't left isolated," he said. "But there's no system for that in the church."

United Church of Canada spokesman Ian Fraser said it is the presbytery (a regional governing body) that hires, disciplines and fires, not congregants.

And it's inaccurate to suggest that any time a review is undertaken "the minister always comes out on the short end of the stick."

Former United Church moderator Rev. Peter Short wrote in his church's national newspaper two years ago that 60 per cent of United Church clergy were experiencing significant conflict with their congregations and that 80 per cent said they get no support from peers.

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