I am grateful for, and flattered by, the invitation to join this celebration of Doug McKenzie’s twenty-five years of ministry and of the mission of the Asbury and West congregation. My topic is “Faith Communities and World Friendship” I had originally intended to refer to the relationship between families and faith communities, but that would have taken too long. I have two texts.

**The first text is from Mark 12: 29:**
“The first commandment is, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”

The commandments to love God and neighbour with our minds - as well as with hearts and souls and strength - has inspired and informed the Methodist-United Church commitments to education and to our efforts to build a more just and peaceful world. I like this emphasis on loving God and neighbour with our minds because it helps to justify the fact that the following remarks will sound more like a lecture than a sermon.

**My second text is from the Nov. 15, 1964 Asbury and West Mortgage Burning Service:**
“There are great challenges to be faced by all of us over the next few years and we can only pray that with God’s help we can band together in unity and singleness of purpose that we might someday see the world as ‘One great fellowship of love throughout the whole round earth.’”

I am using this statement from the 1964 Mortgage Burning Service as one of my texts this morning because this is the mandate Doug McKenzie would have inherited when he began his ministry here twenty-five years ago. Under his leadership this congregation has continued to demonstrate a singleness of purpose to love God and neighbour and to keep alive the hope that one day “the whole round earth” will be “one great fellowship of love.”

**Preamble**
The commandments to love God and neighbour remain unchanged and unquestioned, but in our pluralistic, global society it is no longer as clear as it once appeared to be what love requires and who our neighbours are. As this congregation so clearly illustrates, people who used to live across the world from one another now live on the same street. Children from different cultures, religions and parts of the world attend the same schools and hang out at the same malls. However, while changes in where people live have turned strangers into neighbours, we have not yet arrived at “the one great fellowship of love” envisioned in the quotation from the 1964 Mortgage Burning Ceremony. I do, however, think that there are signs of hope. The main aim of my remarks this morning is to encourage you to welcome some of the changes that have made our society and our church more open and inclusive. I will give four examples of the way in which our United Church tradition has become more inclusive in its self-understanding and in its assumptions about our world.

**1. Ryerson: Schools not sectarian but not secular**
My first example is based upon Egerton Ryerson’s plans for a public school system for Upper
Canada (now Ontario). Ryerson was a Methodist minister, the first Ontario superintendent of schools, and first President of the Methodist Victoria University. He hoped to end debates among religious parents by designing a school system that would not be sectarian - that is, defined by the teachings of a particular religious tradition. It would be neither Protestant not Catholic. It would not be Anglican or Baptist or Methodist or Presbyterian. But neither would it be secular and indifferent to the religious identities of the students. It would be based on what Ryerson called “common Christianity.” Teachers would inculcate basic Christian values and teach basic biblical truths such as the Ten Commandments. Topics such as baptism would be avoided because Baptists, who believed in adult baptism, and other denominations which practiced infant baptism did not have a common approach to baptism.

From a Roman Catholic point of view, Ryerson’s school system looked very Protestant. From the middle of the nineteenth century, Roman Catholics fought for, and were granted, their own school system. However, for the century between the middle of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century the Ontario public school system continued to reflect the assumptions of Ryerson’s “common Christianity.” By the 1960s, the notion of “common Christianity” was too exclusive to do justice to Ontario’s changing population. The United Church became an active member of the Ecumenical Study Commission which took a more inclusive approach to the questions of religious exercises and religious education in Ontario’s public schools. The position of the United Church and the Ecumenical Study Commission was that opening exercises should reflect a variety of religious and non-religious traditions, and that there should be multifaith education in the public schools about all traditions rather than instruction in a particular religion.

2. Christianizing the Social Order

My second example is based upon the 1934 report of the Commission on Christianizing the Social Order. The title of this commission provides another example of the exclusive thinking of an earlier generation. The report itself was a progressive statement of the United Church’s commitment to the social gospel and to the economic policies of the emerging welfare state. However, the authors of the report could simply take it for granted that Canada was a Christian society, and a central aim of the mission of the church was to create a society more faithful to Christian values. By the time the Asbury and West congregation was burning its mortgage in 1964, it seemed more appropriate to use the more inclusive language of “one great fellowship of love.” That language at least left open the possibility that a future could be envisioned in which Jews and Hindus and Muslims would co-exist with Christians - as neighbours to be loved rather than as followers of false gods. The United Church’s recent document, “Bearing Faithful Witness,” which was adopted at General Council in August, provides an explicit statement of the United Church’s commitment to live in fellowship with our Jewish neighbours. A similar report is being prepared on United Church-Muslim relations, and earlier statements and apologies have redefined our relationships with Quebec and with Aboriginal peoples.

3. Church, Nation and World Order - civilizing mission of English-speaking peoples

A report of another United Church commission provides a further illustration of the exclusivist tendencies that have marked our history. The 1944 report of the Commission on
Church, Nation and World Order once again contains progressive responses to the problems of post-war reconstruction. However, it was what was simply taken for granted by the authors of the report that caught my attention. In addition to reaffirming the need to Christianize the world, this report affirmed the civilizing mission of English-speaking peoples. The authors of the report repudiated every suggestion that English-speaking peoples “are a people ‘chosen’ to rule others.” However, as the authors pointed out, “to them much has been given in the infinite providence of God; but from them much is required.. It is their duty to assist subject peoples as quickly as possible along the road to independence.” Persons with an Anglo-Saxon Protestant background now find such references to the civilizing mission of our peoples embarrassing. Persons with other backgrounds may have had experiences that indicate that nothing has changed! However, we can all welcome a shift from explicit claims of that sort to language more in keeping with a commitment to world friendship such as solidarity with victims of injustice and partners in mission.

4. One Earth Community

My fourth and final example illustrates a shift from two types of exclusiveness to a more inclusive outlook. During the early 1990s I was involved in preparations for the UN Conference on Environment and Development which was held in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. Part of the preparatory process involved working on an Earth Charter which would express basic principles and values to guide the nations as they discussed more concrete policies. One of the meetings leading up to the Rio conference was a gathering of representatives of various faith communities. Our task was to draft an Earth Charter on behalf of the world’s religious traditions. Christian, Jewish and Muslim participants initially took it for granted that we should talk about creation and about the intentions of the creator God. A Buddhist from Thailand pointed out that the language of creation and Creator was not part of Buddhist tradition. After a very interesting discussion we ended up agreeing that we could all express our concerns for “the whole round earth” by using the more inclusive term “one earth community.”

The United Church’s acceptance of this more inclusive language was illustrated in a statement issued by the 1992 General Council in response to the Rio meeting. It was called “One Earth Community: Ethical Principles for Environment and Development.” This document also illustrated the second type of inclusiveness I referred to above. Most Protestant writings about environmental issues and about our stewardship of natural resources have tended to be human-centred. Even when we have defended the biblical tradition against the charge that humans have God’s permission to dominate and exploit nature, the assumption has remained that nature is there for humans. The One Earth Community document illustrates a shift in imagery from humans in control of nature to humans as part of the natural world. Our continuing hopes for “one great fellowship of love throughout the whole round earth” now includes the assumption that humans are part of - and in partnership with - the other members of the “one earth community.”

Conclusion
My aim in these remarks has been to encourage you to welcome a shift in emphasis from exclusive to inclusive understandings of what it means to love God and neighbour. We should welcome religious diversity in our public schools, we should use more inclusive images than Christianizing the social order, English-speaking peoples should think of ourselves as friends and partners in struggles for justice rather than people with a civilizing mission to others, and we humans should see ourselves as part of “the one earth community” rather than lords over the rest of nature. My concluding plea is that we shouldn’t take this movement towards more inclusive identities as an excuse to reduce religion to issues of personal salvation and peace of mind. Faith communities continue to have important roles to play as participants in debates about how to respond to the challenges we face.

In its 1964 Mortgage Burning Ceremony, this congregation told itself that:
“There are great challenges to be faced by all of us over the next few years and we can only pray that with God’s help we can band together in unity and singleness of purpose that we might someday see the world as ‘One great fellowship of love throughout the whole round earth.’”

An immediate challenge, of course, is the controversial issue of same sex marriage. For some of us, the full acceptance of gays and lesbians as married couples simply represents a further step along the way towards a more just and inclusive church and society. For others, however, marriage should continue to be between a woman and a man. As the new Moderator, Peter Short, points out in his October pastoral letter, the United Church has an official position supporting same sex marriage, but the authority to determine policy about the conduct of marriages remains with each congregation. His plea to congregations is the plea I will leave with you:

“In light of General Council’s decision, congregations have the opportunity, once again, to create places where discussions are rooted in scripture, where time is taken for quiet and prayer, and where all members of the body of Christ are respected and valued as they seek to discern God’s will for them.”

May the God of grace and patience and justice be with you as you face this and other challenges during your next twenty-five years of working and watching for “one great fellowship of love throughout the whole round earth.”