

Profile

CLIFFORD A. S. ELLIOTT: Prairie Poet, Pioneering Pastor, Public Preacher by Sandra Beardsall ¹



It is at once a joy and a challenge to portray the life and significance of the Rev. Dr. Clifford Allan Stuart Elliott (1919-2006). It is a joy because his life was rich and full, resonant with poetry and wonder. It is a challenge because in some ways he defied categories. His poetry was always at the service of his pastoral task, and that task always led him to the public square — to sites of politics, suffering, art and human struggle. Yet these worldly encounters always found their way back into his generous pastoral presence. This interweaving of attributes gave to the United Church one of its noteworthy pastoral leaders. A study of the life and ministry of this man offers a window into the ethos and identity of the United Church of Canada in some of its most robust and controversial times.

Life Story

Clifford Elliott was born in Langham, Saskatchewan on March 30, 1919, to Annie (Jennings) and George Elliott. He grew up the fourth of five children, with two brothers and two sisters. Their father, George, was a local car and farm implement dealer, whose business collapsed during the economic bleakness of the 1930s on the prairies. Cliff would describe himself as “a child of dust storms and northern lights”, deeply etched by both the poverty and the

¹ I wish to thank Doris Jean Dyke, Stanford Lucyk, and Mary Sanderson for their information and assistance in the preparation of this Profile.

beauty of his prairie upbringing.

Although the family was active in the United Church, Cliff's father became attracted to an evangelistic group that set up tent meetings in the village, and George helped to organize and lead this small sect, while continuing to attend the United Church. Cliff recognized his father's religious fundamentalism as both a treasure and a thorn. From it, he gained his profound respect for Scripture and the importance of a personal faith. His first inkling that he might have a ministerial vocation began in a Bible class led by his father. Cliff had just turned 14, and was walking on Good Friday, 1933, by the banks of the North Saskatchewan River. As the cracking ice promised spring, Cliff found himself promising God, "I will give my life to you, as best I can."² However, he was not at home in the narrowness of his father's faith world, and at age of 17 determined to follow his vocation through the United Church.

The next year, when he was only 18, Cliff accepted a summer mission field in Northern Saskatchewan. Before he set out, however, he received a registered letter from the community. "Don't come," it said. They were experiencing very tough times, and could provide neither accommodation nor a horse. Cliff believed he had no choice but to follow his marching orders, so he went anyway. Some kind parishioners took him in, and eventually he found a shack to live in. He had to walk 25 kilometres every Saturday to one end of his pastoral charge, and back every Sunday to serve his three schoolhouse preaching points. For eight successive Sundays, no one showed up for worship. Yet, Cliff acknowledges, in the midst of that tough, sometimes bitter, initiation into pastoral work, he learned to appreciate the hospitality, creativity and resourcefulness of the people he met. And he learned also, in the long quiet hours of journey on foot, to be in solitude with God and to pray.³

Cliff's singularity of purpose took him through his B.A studies at the University of Saskatchewan, and then his B.D at St. Andrew's

² Clifford Elliott, *"Apples of Gold" to Gladden the Heart: Selected Writings* (Toronto, 2000) p. 57.

³ Clifford Elliott, "Going back to realize the lessons I learned," *United Church Observer*, May 2006 (originally published December 1988) p. 16.

College, Saskatoon. He was ordained in 1942, at the tender age of 23, and was settled at Dundurn, near Saskatoon. In 1944, he married Margaret Patricia Kilpatrick, a gifted musician and poet. That same year they moved to New York, where Patricia studied piano at Julliard and Cliff earned an S.T.M at Union Theological Seminary. They stayed two more years in New York State, with Cliff pastoring a rural congregation and commuting to Columbia University for Ph.D. studies in New Testament.

The couple's sojourn in New York brought Cliff into contact with one of the most vibrant theological communities of the mid-20th century. The famous Presbyterian minister, Henry Sloane Coffin, was Union's President. Two theological titans, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, were faculty colleagues. Niebuhr "troubled consciences" throughout Western Christianity with his searing theological and political critique, accompanied by power activism on many fronts. Tillich's work in systematic theology was world-renowned. He invited both scholars and general readers into a contemporary engagement of theology and culture, as he plumbed the depths of existential philosophical inquiry. Meanwhile, Harry Emerson Fosdick, the 20th century's icon of American liberal Protestantism, was preaching next door to crowds at Riverside Church. Young students like Cliff could not help but be inspired and shaped by this world-engaged intellectual discourse.

While obviously a capable scholar, Cliff understood his central vocation to be that of a pastoral minister. He returned to Saskatchewan, where he completed his doctoral dissertation and graduated in 1950, while ministering at Third Avenue United Church (UC) in Saskatoon, and North Battleford UC (1947-52). He subsequently served St. Giles UC, Hamilton (1952-59); Robertson UC (now Robertson-Wesley), Edmonton (1959-66); Metropolitan UC, Toronto (1966-75); and finally Bloor St. UC, Toronto (1975-1986). During these years, Patricia and Cliff raised four children: Cherry, Kirk, Stuart, and Gracie.

Cliff saw the necessity and potential of preaching the Gospel beyond the sanctuary. The media responded enthusiastically to his gift for inspiring communication, beginning early in his ministry

with the radio programs “Sunday School of the Air” in North Battleford, and “The Good Ship Crusader” in Hamilton. During the 1970s and 80s, he offered two-minute weekly spots on a large Toronto radio station (CFRB). He wrote monthly columns for the *Toronto Star* from the early 1970s until 1995. And from the 1960s on he was a regular contributor to the *United Church Observer*. Cliff also authored six books and co-authored three more, all intended for thoughtful lay/clergy audiences. His work outside the congregation also took him to adjunct teaching appointments at St. Stephen’s College in Edmonton and Emmanuel College, Toronto, as well as part-time chaplaincy at Victoria University.

Travel was another facet of his work that remained important. In the early 1960s, Cliff and two other clergy organized and self-funded a round-the-world tour of church mission projects, so that they could see for themselves, and better interpret to others, the role and future of global mission work. They wrote up their experiences in a book they entitled *Journey to Understanding*.⁴ This quest for deeper understanding continued to take Cliff traveling around the nation and the world.

Another of his lifelong passions was the creative arts. Along with a rich baritone singing voice and his love of music, Cliff encouraged the development of the arts in the congregations he served. He supported an extensive festival of the arts, “Dayspring”, at Metropolitan United. When he moved to Bloor Street he committed himself to the lively and controversial work of its Arts Committee, which introduced the sculpture “The Crucified Woman” to the congregation in 1979.

Cliff retired from full-time parish work in 1986, but his ministry continued to flourish. He served as Pastor in Residence at St. Andrew’s College in Saskatoon, Visiting Professor of Homiletics at the Vancouver School of Theology, and Professor of the Practice of Ministry at Queen’s Theological College. As AIDS burst onto the public scene in the 1980s, Cliff became active in several ways: as a volunteer at Casey House, an AIDS hospice; as a volunteer

⁴ L.E. Smith, G.V. Levan, C.A.S. Elliott, *Journey into Understanding* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1962).

chaplain for a Toronto hospital AIDS ward; as co-facilitator of a support group for family members; and as a member of the AIDS Committee of Toronto.

Reviewing Cliff's ministry, one might be tempted to imagine that his was a charmed existence — large creative congregations, scholarship, publication, teaching, travel and artistic engagement — and in some ways it was. Doors opened, and Cliff walked through them. He seized the opportunities that lay before him, and turned them into rewarding and creative endeavours. Yet he did not choose easy paths. He always recognized his need to know more about the world, and to experience it more deeply, in order to preach the Gospel effectively. He deliberately placed himself in challenging situations, and then reflected on them in his preaching, writing, and speaking engagements.

The pursuit of more profound awareness is particularly evident in Cliff's book, *Speaking for Themselves: Hearing the Gospel From the Dispossessed, the Undervalued, and the Marginalized*.⁵ The fruit of his research with a McGeachy Senior Scholarship, the book introduces eight people whose voices do not usually resonate in middle class congregational life. Each of these persons lived in some way on the edges of social acceptability — poverty, mental illness, sexual orientation. Cliff recounts their stories, and then reflects gently upon them. He relates them unflinchingly to his own experiences, both painful and joyful, always in an attempt to tease out the theological implications of the narratives.

Cliff complemented this desire to learn from others with a disarming modesty. One morning he met a graduate student in the stairwell of Emmanuel College. She told him she was anxious about preaching that afternoon to her peers and professors at the weekly college Eucharist. Cliff responded with his characteristic hearty laugh, as he explained his own weekly homiletical journey. "I always go through phases," he said. "When I first finish writing the sermon, I think it's brilliant — engaging, convincing. Then, after a while, I go back to it, and I think, 'Oh no; there's nothing original in here at all — it's all platitudes!'" But then, finally, before

⁵ Toronto, United Church Publishing House, 1990.

I preach, I convince myself that while it may be platitudes, perhaps it is platitudes *well spoken*.”

Cliff also knew sorrow and trial in his personal life. Patricia suffered several serious bouts of depression, painful episodes for her and for the family. Then she developed breast cancer in 1976, which led to her early death in 1978. Their younger daughter, Gracie, was born with Down’s syndrome, and her care was always a worry for the family. After Patricia’s death, Cliff found it increasingly hard to care for Gracie, and after much agonizing placed her in a residence for mentally handicapped adults. She died suddenly of a heart attack in 1981 at age 21. Cliff confronted these trials with the desire to deepen his faith and understanding, just as he did with the encounters he sought out. From his 1960s world tour, through his family troubles, to the AIDS work of his latter years, he never ceased to look for the Gospel amid brokenness.

Seven years after Patricia’s death Cliff married Mary Sanderson. Mary had worshipped at Metropolitan during Cliff’s tenure there, and they renewed their friendship when he became chair of the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education (MP&E) for the national United Church. Mary was serving as the Associate Secretary of Student Services, a role that brought her into contact with ministry students across the country, and she reported to the MP&E. With the Secretary of MP&E, Howie Mills, playing Cupid, the relationship developed, and the wedding took place at Metropolitan in June, 1984.

In 1995, during successful heart surgery, Cliff suffered a serious stroke, from which he never fully recovered. He lived another ten and a half years at his Toronto home, tended by Mary and a legion of friends and caregivers. He died February 27, 2006, just before his eighty-seventh birthday. His newspaper obituary ended with the strong words of Cliff’s “signature” commissioning: “Go into the world with a daring and a tender love. Go in peace — the world is waiting. And whatever you do, do it for love, and in the Spirit of Jesus, who is your Christ.” Daring, tender, love, peace, and the Spirit of Jesus Christ: these were all hallmarks of Cliff Elliott’s own life and ministry.

Significance: A Pioneering Pastor with a Public Presence

Cliff Elliott was intelligent, educated, curious and articulate. He chose to put these gifts at the service of congregational life. As a result, he became a pioneering pastor, ready to invite his congregations to experience new learning together with him. He embraced the lectionary, and encouraged the increasing leadership of laity in worship, not only through reading and serving, but also through co-operation in planning worship and offering the prayers of the people. He wrote poetry for worship bulletin covers. He brought his travel experiences and the cries of the poor into his sermons, which were renowned for their ability to stir both hearts and minds. Cliff's preaching became even more effective with his decision to write and then learn his sermons, so that he could deliver them without notes from the sanctuary floor. As second-wave feminism emerged in North American churches in the late 1970s, Cliff was among the first clergy in the United Church to use inclusive language in prayer. He addressed God as Mother and as Father. Yet, as bold and challenging as his worship leadership might be, Cliff never failed to offer also a vision of comfort and compassion. He approached worship and preaching as a disciple among disciples, hearing the word with the same trepidation and astonishment, the same mixture of hurt and yearning, as his listeners.

A test of these pioneering pastoral skills emerged with force in 1978-79, when the Bloor St. United Church Arts Committee began to consider displaying the sculpture, "Crucified Woman", by Canadian sculptor Almuth Lutkenhaus-Lackey. The sculpture is eight feet tall, and features a nude cruciform woman. After much discussion, and with the permission of the Worship Committee, the Arts Committee placed the sculpture at the side of the nave. With the coming of the Good Friday and Easter services it was moved to the chancel, below the traditional cross. The secular press jumped on the story. "Nude Sculpture Greets Congregation" blared the front-page headline, along with a colour photo of Cliff

and the sculpture.⁶ Newspapers across North America picked up the story, as did television and radio networks. The Bloor Street congregation, and Cliff in particular, dealt with a barrage of praise and criticism, including threats. Toronto South Presbytery entertained a motion to investigate Cliff for heresy. (The motion failed miserably.)

Cliff recognized the moment not only as a time for pastoral care and listening, but also as an opportunity for theological discussion. As he later wrote: “In retrospect, there is no doubt that this one piece of art dramatically posed some very basic questions: What did the incarnation mean? Who is on the cross today? Can we feel and share the hurt of women who have been oppressed and exploited? Can we see ourselves on the cross? ... It made us ask, ‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’”⁷

Characteristically, Cliff also saw the public controversy around “Crucified Woman” as a point of contact with secular culture, a form of evangelism. It fed his desire to make theology a public engagement. In some ways, he emulated the field preachers of 18th Century England, braving the slings and arrows of the public square to bring the Gospel to those beyond the churches’ doors. Unlike most of those earlier evangelists, however, Cliff understood his work in the world to be a dialogue of the church *with* the world, each prepared to be taught and caught in a better vision of God’s realm than the one they could muster on their own. He also remained grounded in the parish he served, and loyal to the polity within which he ministered. He considered his public presence to be an extension of his congregational ministry. A poem Cliff wrote for the January 7, 1973 bulletin cover at Metropolitan UC sums up his pastoral intention:

Take wheat –
Scatter it on hills and valleys of the world,
Let it grow and harden.
Gather it together:

⁶ Doris Jean Dyke, *The Crucified Woman* (United Church Publishing House, 1991) p. 4.

⁷ Clifford Elliott, “Crucified Woman,” *International Review of Mission* 71 (July 1982) p. 335. Reprinted from *Exchange* (Winter 1982).

Let each grain yield itself to millstones
 To make flour;
 And let the flour bear the cruel heat of ovens
 To make bread
 For the world.

Take human beings –
 Scatter them on streets and skyscrapers of the city,
 Let them grow and learn.
 Gather them together:
 Let each one yield to Christ's commands
 To make a church.
 And let the church bear the cruel heat of human pain
 To become bread
 For the world.⁸

Legacy: United Church Icon

With its thoughtful pastoral and public countenance, the ministry of Cliff Elliott embodied the commitments of the wider United Church in the late 20th century. Many of the church's theological leaders of that era shared Cliff's formation in the theological crucible of New York City. As Cliff and his colleagues embarked on their world tour in the 1960s, the United Church was undertaking a formal and thorough reconsideration of its global mission theology.⁹ Cliff's liturgical innovations reflected the excitement of post-Vatican II ecumenical convergences on worship. National church commitments to gender inclusive language came hard on the heels of Cliff's experience with "Crucified Woman." As Cliff engaged with the Toronto AIDS community — comprised at that time almost exclusively of gay males — the United Church was wrestling with sexual orientation issues.

Whether Cliff's actions preceded or coincided with those of his denomination, Cliff's contribution was to represent them with

⁸ Used with permission of Mary Sanderson.

⁹ This work culminated in a 192-page report of the Commission on World Mission, received at the 22nd General Council in 1966. The story of the establishment of the Commission in 1962, the events that led up to it, and the effects of its recommendations, are recounted in an article published in the May, 2009, issue of *Touchstone*, "To Share In God's Concern For All", written by Hyuk Cho.

public grace and sensitivity. He was emblematic of all the United Church hoped to be in that day: progressive, faithful, engaged with the world. In his person, he embraced the best of the church's heritage, too: from the sturdiness of his rural prairie roots to his steadfast love of the modern city, from his christocentric preaching to his courageous explorations of new ways to speak the faith. "Some called him," reported Donna Sinclair at his death, "the best Moderator we never had."¹⁰

The fact that Cliff did not become Moderator also reflects an aspect of the late 20th century United Church. He came close to the position, losing at the 1986 General Council on the sixth and final ballot to Anne Squire, the second woman and first lay woman to receive the mantle. With his typical humility, Cliff had pondered withdrawing his nomination when he realized there were two lay female candidates also nominated. Colleagues urged him to stay in the race, however, so that whoever won would do so with integrity. As he was quick to realize, and gracious to accept, his iconic status was of an era. The "best face" of the United Church was transforming into one that would challenge the age-old understanding of Protestant Christian ministry leadership as male, white, and heterosexual. Cliff had used that privilege to advocate for the voices of others, and his part in this movement of advocacy was coming to fruition.

That shift does not negate the power of Clifford Elliott's witness in church and world in his time and place. In one of his later books, Cliff recounts the life of the cicada, as presented by the theologian C.S. Song. Cicadas, after years of slow maturation, live only a few brief weeks as adults. So, he writes, "they must sing! So we, in our brief span of life here on earth, must find a song to sing."¹¹ Cliff found his song, and he sang it with heart and mind, body and soul. He beckoned all he encountered to do the same, and thus helped to cultivate, in his few brief decades, a world-engaged heavenly chorus.

¹⁰ Donna Sinclair, "A Jesus Person Remembered," *United Church Observer*, May 2006, p. 15.

¹¹ Clifford Elliott, *With Integrity of Heart: Living Values in Changing Times* (New York: Friendship Press, 1991) p. 136.