

# *Touchstone*

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## THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL WITNESS

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## EDITORIAL

This June marks the ninetieth anniversary of The United Church of Canada and our cover is graced by the seal of the United Church, amended recently by the General Council. Where blue formerly provided background to the four symbols within the arms of the cross, now the four colours of traditional Aboriginal spirituality do. As well, Mohawk words for “All my relations” have been added to the original motto of the seal, *Ut omnes unum sint* (“That All May Be One”). Humbling experience with the First Nations, especially as related to the abuses of the Indian Residential Schools, led to this change. Responsible for the administration of fourteen residential schools over most of a century, the United Church is attempting to live into a reconciled relationship with Aboriginal people. This desire for right relationship with Indigenous people is in continuity with a long theological commitment to what our forebears called “social righteousness.”

The United Church began as the dream for a single Protestant church to serve the far-flung population of a young nation and to make it more deeply Christian. Those who sought such a pan-Protestant church in Canada also were influenced by the modern ecumenical movement, a movement generated by missionary passion for more faithful and effective Christian witness globally. While these two strands largely motivated unionist supporters, there were other strands influencing the vision and, after union, the developing character of the young church.

This number of *Touchstone* takes as its theme the importance of theological foundations for social witness. For many, of course, the United Church is primarily identified with the social gospel and action in service of social justice. However, because the theological strands woven into the fabric of the new church were several, one must be careful not to regard only one of them as formative, or as definitive of a “United Church theology.” The church that was coming into being in the first two decades of the twentieth century was both revivalist and scholarly, as the Crossley-Hunter Evangelistic Team was crossing the country and theological colleges were raising the bar on theological education. The uniting churches advocated both the piety of a family

altar and also of social righteousness. The new church was to feel the pull of “Christianizing the social order” and of the more individualistic appeal of the Oxford Movement.

Keeping such diverse strands in mind, it is nonetheless important to recognize that social witness belongs integrally to the Christian faith in which the United Church is rooted. Both the Reformed and Wesleyan founding traditions understood that gospel obedience entails not only personal conversion to Christ but also conversion to Christ’s lordship in all of life. The reformation in Calvin’s Geneva included strong advocacy for public education and the care of refugees and the poor. The Wesley brothers were zealous for reformation of the social ills of industrial England as well as the salvation of souls. Thus, the mandate of social witness as a part of Christian obedience is an incontestable aspect of the United Church pedigree. It is no accident, then, that our profile is on J. S. Woodsworth, an iconic Canadian social activist, who began his career as a Methodist minister. Author Harold Wells will present the second part of the Woodsworth profile in the October number.

One of the challenges facing us in the United Church is that we may adopt an unreflective allegiance to good causes, an allegiance not identifiably different in character from the allegiance of other activist groups to their causes. Then “Justice” becomes a *shibboleth*, and the commitment of the church to justice is seen as its *raison d’etre*. Our goal in this number is to explore the foundations of faith and theology that undergird Christian social witness and that authenticate it as Christian. In the spirit of the key United Church document, *Mending the World*, we always will be prepared to collaborate with others who seek a world of justice and peace. Yet our commitment as Christians with world-mending work will be the result of aligning ourselves with a divine initiative. The other world that we seek is the realm proclaimed by Jesus, the realm of God’s coming full reign.

In our lead article, Board Chair Rob Fennell considers the way that christology, Christian anthropology, and eschatology provide firm foundations for Christian social engagement. Together these faith convictions give encouragement that “another world is possible.” John Young then reminds us of a vital, if forgotten, formative theological

strand in the young United Church—liberal evangelicalism, showing that not all concern and action for the common good was of the social gospel type. Might liberal evangelicalism provide a usable legacy today? In another article, Executive Director Jennifer Henry of Kairos celebrates the social witness of Canadian churches through the inter-church coalitions on social justice. She invokes categories from Walter Brueggemann to recount the origins of the coalitions and their continuing significance in the present-day ecumenical coalition, Kairos.

Another challenge faced by the United Church today is the loss of a mandate for evangelism. In a letter published a year ago in *The United Church Observer*, distinguished United Church theologian Douglas Hall lamented this loss. “A church that tries to survive on exhortation (for example, to ‘justice’) is as doomed as the parenthood that tries to rear children on ‘Do this. Don’t do that.’ The children are always going to ask why.” Evangelism need not be stereotypically smug, and Diane Walker offers the portrait of a congregation that seems to be effective in producing disciples through unambiguous commitment to Christ.

Not too long ago the United Church replaced “stewardship” with the title and language of “philanthropy,” as it renewed its quest for gifts to the Mission and Service Fund and the United Church Foundation. What this change may or may not signal is thrown into relief by David Lappano’s exposition of a theme in the writing of Søren Kierkegaard. Whether we agree completely with Kierkegaard’s sharp contrast between philanthropy and mercifulness, he forces us to reflect on our motives in giving, and on the gospel summons to mercy.

We are privileged to have our “From the Heart” column written by eminent Canadian Catholic, Gregory Baum. He traces the story of his radicalizing conversions in an unfolding life of faith. Last in the number is Don Schweitzer’s astute review article on two recent histories of the United Church, one of them a long-awaited and magisterial study by Phyllis Airhart, dean of Canadian church historians.

May you find the articles in this number as stimulating and challenging as I have found.

*Peter Wyatt*

# **THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE**

**by Rob Fennell**

Social justice, in a wide variety of forms, has been a significant focus of The United Church of Canada since its formation in 1925. Now, ninety years later, social justice continues to be crucial to the denomination's self-understanding and missional impulse. "To do justice" might be the answer a great many United Church members would give if asked to describe the church's purpose. To love kindness and to walk humbly with God would be close finishers, completing the familiar trilogy of Micah 6:8:

[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

In this essay I would like to suggest that the work of social justice—desiring it, seeking it, and enacting it—is strengthened when we consider its theological foundations. To be mere "do-gooders," working away at helping people so long as our energy and interest can sustain it, is perhaps not a sufficient basis for the lasting transformation of our world. Rather, we will find our hope and our inspiration in the mission of a loving God, the one God whose desire is transformation of all the earth into a place of peace, justice, wholeness and love. It is God's mission, then, and not simply our own, that is the mission into which we are called and for which we are equipped. To explore the shape of this mission, I offer here three doctrinal frames of reference: christology, theological anthropology, and eschatology. Each of these sheds light on the common Christian quest for the common good: for liberation, hope, and life abundant.

## **Christology**

For our forebears in the faith, from the ancient Christian era to the heyday of the Social Gospel movement that is such an important part of

the United Church story, Jesus Christ has been welcomed and honoured as the exemplar and source of justice-making. For Christians, the shape and character of justice work turns on what we have learned from Jesus. Again, it is not simply our best wishes and fondest hopes that inform what we do. Rather, it is the reality of God embodied and communicated to us in Jesus of Nazareth, the one called Messiah (Christ), that guides the work of social justice. The passage from Isaiah 61:1-2, which Jesus reads aloud in Luke 4:18-21 near the beginning of his public ministry, provides a crystallization of his purposes as an activist in a world that needs healing and transformation:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because [God] has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor  
[and] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

. . . Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Jesus carried this mission “program” into all aspects of his life and witness, culminating in his death, resurrection, and ascension. Again and again, Isaiah 61:1-2, and so much of the other prophets’ witness, is reflected in Jesus’ person and work. He sought out, healed, and loved lepers, impoverished women and men, the forgotten, strangers and foreigners, and those thrust to the margins and often left to die from neglect. Jesus knew that such abandonment of our brothers and sisters is contrary to the Torah:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the foreigner . . . [and] you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord (Leviticus 19:9-10, 18).

Determined to enact God's desire for all persons to be regarded with dignity and welcomed into the household of God, Jesus did not allow barriers of race, class and economic status to prevent the flow of grace and solidarity. He denounced the distorted social order of ancient Israel under Roman oppression, in continuity with the prophetic tradition. He noticed those who had been shoved aside, and announced to them, in particular, a new order. In God's just and peaceful *basileia* (kingdom or realm), the mighty would be removed from their thrones and the poor lifted up. "The last shall be first, and the first last," he told his stunned audience (Matt. 20:16). Such a holy reversal has apocalyptic accompaniments and eternal ramifications. This will not be a matter of a few adjustments to the current systems of empire and domination. It will be an entirely new order, expressed in the ancient age by the prophets:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

These reflections of Jesus' ministry and message are important because, as the Christ, he offers us a glimpse of God's desires and purposes. He models for us a way of living that includes the excluded, embraces the unloved, and calls *beloved* all whom the world rejects. To follow in his way, then, is to learn from him how to encounter others and to seek the good of all, most particularly those on the underside, the unclean, and the dispossessed. Our life together and our personal lives as disciples are shaped in a christoform pattern when we attend to Jesus' ways of being in the world and the vision he proclaimed. Social justice in a Christian key, in all its expressions, takes its cue from Jesus, who is liberator and life-bringer.

## Theological Anthropology

To speak of theological anthropology is to consider what human beings are, and what we have been created for. A theological anthropology cued to the concerns of social justice understands God's human creatures first as *good, beloved, and worthy* (Gen. 1:26-27, 31), and second as *fundamentally social and inter-dependent* (thus reflecting the image of the triune God). We are made for one another, made to be good and careful keepers of one another's hearts and indeed of our whole lives. God's ironic question to Cain—"Where is your brother?"—provokes Cain's unintentionally self-convicting response, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9). In biblical terms, the answer is always *yes*. We are one another's keepers. God gives us to one another.

The hallmarks of our humanity then, our very humanness, are solidarity and reciprocity. Current explorations in inter-cultural ministry and the inter-cultural church are teaching us this. We are all both guest and host, served and serving.<sup>1</sup> We are not meant to live in unidirectional social relations in which some have super-surplus power and resources that they deign to share with others. Christian faith regards with suspicion, and even condemns, a social order organized to "promote the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few and rob the many of a decent livelihood."<sup>2</sup> Rather, since the earth is our common home, the good we enjoy is meant to be commonly shared. This gestures toward the "abundant life" that Jesus came to bring (John 10:10).

Our regard for one another, then, is grounded in God's regard for us as beloved. Since "even the most wretched specimen of humanity still had value to him,"<sup>3</sup> Jesus said to his followers, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). *Love one another*: not just when we feel like it, or when our neighbor is especially deserving or attractive to us, or meets some other standard that we have personally established. No: Jesus says, *Love one another*, and he says it with the

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<sup>1</sup> See HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "To Love and Serve Others (or to Be Loved and Served)," in *Intercultural Visions: Called to Be the Church*, ed. Rob Fennell (Toronto: UCPH, 2012), 23-32.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Falconer and Walter T. Brown, [*Report of the Commission on*] *Christianizing the Social Order* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1934), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus* (New York: Association Press, 1923), 3.



audacity of the Messiah, framing it as a commandment. Love one another. Seek the well-being of your sister. Be generous to your brother. Help and be helped. Give and receive. Know yourself as part of this one human family. Moreover, in the fullness of this anthropocene age, we must today learn to love the earth, too, lest our harm toward it outpace its capacity to sustain life.

To love one another, quite apart from our personal adjudication of another person's lovability, is to embrace the biblical conviction that each one whom God has made is good, beloved, and worthy. To be persons who love one another is to acknowledge in our hearts and in our lives that we are made for one another. The work of social justice grounds itself, in part, in this radical perspective on human beings and each person's intrinsic value. This is so very different from the individualized, commoditized, endlessly conflicted Self that in our contemporary world strives to assert itself over against all other Selves. By the grace of God, we are learning to love each other rather than use and abuse one another. To see another human being, or a whole group or nation, suffering, impoverished, degraded or deprived of agency in their own lives, must necessarily stir us to cry out and to act in solidarity with them toward their liberation and life abundant.

### **Eschatology**

The eschatological frame of social justice was significant in the social gospel movement of the early twentieth century. In the context of rapid industrialization, mass migration, and swelling urban populations that overburdened available services and infrastructure, the social gospel advocates of Canada and the United States heard the echoes of the prophets of Israel and the witness of Jesus Christ ringing loudly. Unjust social, economic, and political structures, they argued, were systemically exacerbating the suffering of both urban and rural populations. Wealth was not only unevenly distributed, but unjustly accruing to the ownership class on the backs of the working poor. Political power was tightly controlled by oligarchies within centralized government. Leaders such as J.S. Woodsworth (profiled in this number) initiated path-breaking studies of the atrocious living conditions of the urban poor,

such as those living in the tenements of inner city Winnipeg.<sup>4</sup> Nellie McClung, commenting on the story of the Good Samaritan, pointed out that it was not enough to bind up the wounds of the man who was robbed. We also need motivated people, as she put it, “to go out and clean up the road!”<sup>5</sup> In short, the social order must be transformed.

This sketch of the century-old concerns of the social gospel movement serves to illustrate the way they responded to these social, political, and economic problems. They did so according to the standards of what they called the kingdom of God. That is, the realm or reign of God, the fullness of God’s purposes, is the benchmark against which social conditions are to be judged. As McClung put it,

There is enough for everyone, if we could get at it. There is food and raiment, a chance to live, and love and labour—for everyone; [... but] some others have reached out and taken more than their share, and try to excuse their “hoggishness” by declaring that God did not intend all to travel on the same terms, but you and I know God better than that.<sup>6</sup>

The world has its troubles, but Christians perceive these precisely *as* troubles because we are aware of an alternative world. An unending state of poverty for a permanent underclass is not to be the final word for our world. Warfare, a gender-based wage gap, uncured curable disease, violence, abuse, and corrupt political orders are not meant to last forever. Indeed, as the motto of the World Social Forum has succinctly put it, “another world is possible.”<sup>7</sup> Though Woodsworth, McClung, and their collaborators lived long before the World Social Forum came into existence, they would have shared this conviction. As Christians, visions of this other world sprang from their faithful imaginations, fired as they were by their hopeful anticipation of all that God intends. Like the New

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, J.S. Woodsworth, *My Neighbour: A Study of City Conditions; A Plea for Social Service* (Toronto: Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1911).

<sup>5</sup> McClung, *In Times Like These* (Toronto: Geo. J. McLeod Ltd., 1919), 126.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> <https://fsm2015.org/en>.

Testament writers, they called this the kingdom of God, an eschatological reality for which they longed in the present.

For us today, the consummation of God's desires, the realm of God, or God's commonwealth might be used as synonymous terms for the kingdom language in order to help us avoid Empire rhetoric and exclusive male language. Just as important, the eschatological content of these terms points us not merely toward the life to come or a naïve "pie in the sky" futurist hope. As Jürgen Moltmann has emphasized, eschatology also points us back into the present, the here and now of where we are, making us restless for the way things ought to be. The future impinges upon the present. We can look upon or be in the midst of suffering, poverty, racism, sexism, marginalization, and economic disenfranchisement, and see—indeed, *know* with all our hearts and minds—that another way is possible. In the resurrection of Jesus, and elsewhere, we have glimpsed the realm of God: the place and way of shalom, harmony, peace, joy, love, embrace, cooperation and bread in abundance. This is the just future that gives us hope, for which we long, to which we cling and toward which we strive—in the present. Those committed in Christian terms to social justice do not look upon the world's misery only to shrug at it. Rather, we are fired by a holy impatience for a better way, a way God has set before us in Scripture:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;  
and you that have no money, come, buy, and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price  
(Isaiah 55:1).

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more . . . [God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away (Revelation 21:1-14).

Christian commitments to social justice, informed by the eschatological vision of Scripture, resonate across time and across the globe. Here in Canada and elsewhere in the Western world, the desire

and struggle for social justice persists in ways that are pertinent for our societies. In the global South, similar struggles are underway, in a key that is locally relevant. Quite often we see it expressed in the terms of liberation theology, a theological expression that raises social justice to the highest degree of relevance:

Faced with a situation of widespread suffering, oppression, and misery, within which heroic efforts both for change and resistance coexist, liberating theology emphasizes the need to affirm a new order, an alternative to that of the present one which favors human life and wholeness for entire peoples who now lack them.<sup>8</sup>

The struggle continues, wherever injustice in all its forms endures, from inner city Canada to Ferguson and Baltimore, from Canada's Aboriginal territories to the sweatshops of Bangladesh, from human trafficking on the high seas to the favelas of Brazil.

### **Conclusion<sup>9</sup>**

Jesus embodied Israel's great hope for a just world. He was not content to see hungry people stay hungry; he did not sit by comfortably when the poor were marginalized or the sick were forgotten. To his work he added disciples, commissioning them to heal and serve, and to call still more into his mission. Finally, the whole church is called into being for the sake of serving that mission, a mission that was, and remains, designed to change the world; truly to transform it. The work of social justice will not be done until that day comes.

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<sup>8</sup> María Pilar Aquino, "The challenge of Hispanic women," *Missiology* 20, no.2 (1 Apr 1992): 263.

<sup>9</sup> With my thanks to Néstor Medina, Martin Rumscheidt and Harold Wells for their suggestions and guidance.

# **LIBERAL EVANGELICALISM AND THE FORMATION OF THE UNITED CHURCH: A USABLE LEGACY FOR OUR FUTURE?**

**by John H. Young**

Most of the leaders in the denominations that came together in 1925 to form The United Church of Canada, not to mention some of the Presbyterians who opted to remain with the continuing Presbyterian Church, would have described themselves as liberal evangelicals. Heirs of an evangelical Protestant tradition particularly prominent in Methodism, but by no means absent from Presbyterianism or Congregationalism, they reworked that inheritance during the latter part of the nineteenth century as a result of the rise of liberal theology. The result was liberal evangelicalism. The term “liberal evangelical,” so very common in the first quarter of the twentieth century as a description both of the denominations and their key leaders, has generally become lost in the mists of time, in part because of the rise of other currents in United Church thought, and probably in part because of our ongoing discomfort with the word “evangelism.”

In this essay, I want first to sketch the shape and origins of liberal evangelicalism. Then I shall show, briefly, how those who favoured church union understood their actions in forming The United Church of Canada as an expression of their liberal evangelicalism. Third, I will ask why that “liberal evangelical” stream generally declined, at least as a noticeable force in the United Church. Finally, are there aspects of this legacy that we might wish to recover as we celebrate the ninetieth anniversary of church union?

## **What Was Liberal Evangelicalism?**

In the mid-nineteenth century, members of all three of the founding denominations placed significant weight on personal regeneration. Methodists, for example, had always stressed the importance of a personal conversion experience for every member of the denomination. Religious revivals were a feature of Presbyterianism as much as Methodism, and American Congregationalism had been much affected

by the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. At the same time, the experience of being saved was expected to translate into a changed life. That changed life would manifest itself not only in personal life, but also in commitment to societal outreach and reform. The movement to abolish slavery, both in Great Britain and in the United States, is perhaps the most obvious example, but the rise of missionary societies, concern about the welfare of prisoners, and the establishment of hospitals and public education were “causes” in which nineteenth century evangelical Protestants in both Great Britain and the United States played an important role. Canadian evangelical Protestants, influenced by events in both those countries, participated in similar activities here.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century the tenets of liberal theology, whose roots lay in Germany, began to affect all three of the denominations that would come together to form the United Church. Among the key aspects of liberal theology were the following: a focus on Jesus as the “model” human being, one every Christian should emulate;<sup>1</sup> optimism about the human condition and what human beings could accomplish; the kingdom of God as something to be established here on earth, not just a future reality; and a conception of sin as both individual and collective (the latter aspect a growing emphasis in liberal theology, though it complemented, rather than supplanted, the concept of individual sin). Not surprisingly, given their optimism about the human condition, the proponents of liberal theology gave great attention to the environment in which a person lived as a factor in their capacity for growth and self-improvement. In sum, they had a strong belief in human progress.

Liberal evangelicals, as liberals, accepted significant aspects of liberal theology. Generally they were open to and supportive of the “higher criticism” of the Bible, which was increasing in influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They also accepted new scientific learning, such as about the evolutionary origins of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Think, for example, of the late nineteenth century novel, *In His Steps*, by American Congregationalist minister, Charles Sheldon. This novel popularized the concept and the slogan, “What Would Jesus Do?”

But, as evangelicals, they maintained the historic doctrines of the Christian faith and the “experimental” (experiential) quality of living it. Nathanael Burwash, a Methodist minister who became chancellor of Victoria University and was reputedly described by Wilfrid Laurier as “the head and front of Methodism,” is a pre-eminent case in point. Burwash taught theology at Victoria University for over thirty years, but before his appointment in theology he was professor of natural science, having prepared himself with several months study at the Sheffield School of Science at Yale. On the one hand, he incorporated evolutionary theory in his worldview. He also defended critical study of the Bible when the Methodist Church was wracked with controversy over higher criticism. On the other hand, his *Manual of Christian Theology on the Inductive Method* expounded historical doctrines like the atonement, and insisted on the indispensable foundation of religion as the “inner assurance of faith.”<sup>2</sup> Burwash also was an ardent supporter of global Christian mission. He represents well the dialectical balance of the liberal evangelicals.

Over time, revivalism, and a personal conversion experience, gradually came to be downplayed by liberal evangelicals. For example, in an era when many children had been raised in a Christian home and had always tried to live a Christian life, and writers such as Horace Bushnell were influential in emphasizing Christian nurture, the idea of requiring a “conversion experience” gradually fell out of favour in Canadian Methodism. As well, churches increasingly were being served by college-educated ministers whose leadership broadened the horizon of the spiritual beyond revivalism. During the first part of the twentieth century, as emphasis on a specific event of conversion lessened, being a Christian came to be seen as a practical matter of living the faith, devoting oneself to life-long service of God through service to neighbour.<sup>3</sup> There was no lack of emphasis in liberal evangelicalism on

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<sup>2</sup> Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), 58. I am indebted to Prof. Van Die’s biography of Burwash for much of the material in this paragraph.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of this change in perspective in Canadian Methodism, see Phyllis D. Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition*

belief in God or education in the tenets of the faith. Liberal evangelicals saw evangelism and social service as strongly linked, and some denominations, like the United Church after 1925, had a national board or committee of Evangelism and Social Service.

In the Canadian context, liberal evangelicalism combined a deep and obviously public commitment to God, especially in the person of Jesus, with a life of service that included the creation of a Canadian society that addressed the needs of the disadvantaged, bettered the life of all, and reflected Christian values. In the growing optimism and national spirit of the several decades preceding World War I, not to mention during that conflict and afterwards, Canadian liberal evangelicals increasingly expressed strong patriotic feelings and sought to advance Canadian national interests as they understood them. One's gifts, whether of material possessions or of talents, were a blessing from God and were to be used for the common good. That life of service included attention to a range of causes associated with the social gospel. While the social gospel has sometimes been defined as stressing societal salvation over against individual salvation, Phyllis Airhart has argued that the period leading up to church union saw not simply a shift from preoccupation with "salvation of the individual" to "salvation of society," but rather a changed understanding of what salvation of the individual entailed. It was tied to a different approach to piety at both the personal and the social level.<sup>4</sup> She also asserts that "persons generally identified with the social gospel movement in Canada were intensely preoccupied with personal religious experience."<sup>5</sup>

Leading figures in the Canadian Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist Churches, sometimes supported by Baptists, Anglicans or Roman Catholics, had come together in various coalitions or committees in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to address what they saw as compelling moral and social issues. Among those issues were: a common day of rest for workers (the Lord's Day

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*in Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 94-122.

<sup>4</sup> Phyllis D. Airhart, "Christianizing the Social Order and Founding Myths—Double Vision?"

*Toronto Journal of Theology* 12, No. 2 (1996): 176.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



Act), temperance and alcohol-related problems, prostitution, and the poor living conditions of many urban dwellers. When voluntary efforts at reform failed, these coalitions sought governmental prescriptive action to produce the conditions that allowed members of society to live a healthy, moral, and Christian life. As the twentieth century advanced, liberal evangelicals worked for broader social reforms, such as women's suffrage, public education, and the foundation, support, and expansion of universities. They appreciated new scientific knowledge and were, for the most part, progressive in their views, and optimistic about Canada's possibilities in the world.

### **Liberal Evangelicalism and the Formation of the United Church**

Canadian liberal evangelicals in early twentieth century Canada faced challenges that they judged could only be addressed if their denominations came together. Two primary challenges threatened the "Christian Canada" that Protestant liberal evangelicals had been trying to build through their efforts for moral and social reform. One was Western Canada, where large numbers of immigrants, especially in the fifteen years or so before World War I, had caused a rapid increase in population. Meeting the needs of the new settlers for pastoral services was problematic enough. Far more serious, though, was the large number of non-Anglo-Saxon settlers (primarily from Central and Eastern Europe) who needed to be "Canadianized" and "Christianized." "Canadianized" meant having them adopt British customs and Victorian morals. "Christianized" meant making them into good Protestants, for the adherence of the newcomers to either Roman Catholicism or one of the Orthodox traditions was not perceived as a "real" Christian affiliation.<sup>6</sup> These immigrants, with their "different ways," represented a

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<sup>6</sup> Such sentiments were not restricted to Protestant denominations. Roman Catholics viewed the settlements of the West in the same way, except, of course, they feared that Roman Catholicism would lose members to various Protestant denominations by virtue of the Roman Catholic Church's inadequate numbers of priests and female religious to serve the rapidly growing West. For an early twentieth century Roman Catholic perspective on this "challenge," and the extent to which discussion among Protestants of a possible church union was perceived to be a threat to Roman Catholicism, see George Daly, *Catholic*

threat to Canada as Protestant liberal evangelicals saw and understood the nation.

Rapidly growing cities, with inadequate housing and poor social conditions, presented the other primary challenge. These two serious issues threatened the development of the moral, humane, Christian Canada that liberal evangelicals envisioned. Combining the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational Churches would create greater efficiency and therefore more resources could be devoted to these two situations.

A sense among these Protestant liberal evangelicals that they had much in common, both theologically and ethically, also led them to support church union as a removal, at least in part, of the scandal of a divided Christian witness.

When one looks at the arguments and justifications presented for church union, two related aspects of the campaign for church union stand out. First, and strikingly, the primary justification offered, the most important aspect of the founding vision, was creating a Christian Canada, or, to put the matter another way, ensuring an ongoing informal establishment, at least in English-speaking Canada, of liberal evangelical Protestantism. Phyllis Airhart observes that among church unionists, the theme of creating a “national church” occurs far more frequently than “social gospel” or “Christianizing the social order.”<sup>7</sup> While undoubtedly the desire for a “national church” was related directly to the desire to have sufficient size and power to be able to implement their moral and social agenda, the language is instructive nonetheless.

In support of Airhart’s assessment, and in addition to the examples she cites, one could take the case of Samuel Dwight Chown, the Methodist General Superintendent. Like most of the leading supporters of church union, Chown was a moderate liberal evangelical. In his retrospective account of church union, he declared that the motives for church union “may be classified under three divisions, as spiritual,

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*Problems in Western Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1921).

<sup>7</sup> Airhart, “Christianizing the Social Order and Founding Myths,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 12, No. 2, 170-172.

patriotic, and economic.”<sup>8</sup> At a slightly later point, when Chown continued to write about the motivation for church union, he spoke positively about “religion and patriotism” combining “for the country’s good.”<sup>9</sup> Book titles by two other key supporters of church union, both of whom served as moderators of the United Church quite early in its history, also suggest this sense of obligation to and for Canada—*His Dominion* by William T. Gunn (1917) and *His Dominion of Canada* by Edmund H. Oliver (1932). A strong sense of service, and of service to help make a better Canada, a more Christian Canada, played a key role in the strong support of liberal evangelicals for church union.

Second, while transforming or “Christianizing” the social order was a part of the founding vision, it was not “the” [sole] founding vision. The more radical supporters of the social gospel who did not leave their respective denominations in disgust at the churches’ reaction to the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 were certainly strong supporters of church union, and saw church union as something that could aid the causes for which they campaigned. But most of the liberal evangelicals supporting church union were of the moderate variety, even as within the social gospel movement itself, the numerically dominant group were the “progressives” who represented the middle ground between the conservative and radical wings of that movement.<sup>10</sup> In her recent history of the United Church, Phyllis Airhart suggests that the changed times in which we have lived since the late 1960s have led to a “subtle revision of the [United Church’s] past,”<sup>11</sup> a revision that has given a greater place

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Dwight Chown, *The Story of Church Union* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1930), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Allen, in his study of the social gospel in Canada, sees supporters of the social gospel divided into three groups. The conservatives “were closest to traditional evangelicalism,” and they focussed on “personal-ethical issues.” There were radicals who saw evil so deeply entrenched in society that the social order needed major change. Finally a large group of progressives tried to straddle a broad central position between the other two groups, supporting some of the initiatives of each. See Richard Allen, *The Social Passion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 17. Allen is quick to note that this typology is not his own, but one he drew from Charles Hopkins’s study of the social gospel in the United States, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915*.

<sup>11</sup> Phyllis D. Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 297.

to the radical wing of the social gospel and “tended to diminish the role of the more moderate liberal evangelical majority who too hoped to build the Kingdom of God.”<sup>12</sup>

### **What Happened to Liberal Evangelicalism?**

If this theological perspective represented the viewpoint of those who pressed for church union, why does it seem to have faded away? Four factors appear to have contributed to the gradual breakdown of liberal evangelicalism. First, even before church union, tension existed among liberal evangelicals in relation to the kind of moral and social reform for which the Church should press. Richard Allen sees tensions rising among these three wings of the social gospel movement from 1914 through 1928,<sup>13</sup> and other historians such as John Webster Grant point to events from the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike onward that created division in the ranks of the social gospellers.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, liberal evangelicals also would have included all three of Allen’s types within its ranks.

Second, at the time of church union, most liberal evangelicals viewed “Evangelism” and “Social Service” as inseparable. If some placed more emphasis on one than the other, usually the differences would not have concerned the necessity of knowing and sharing the Christian story in word and deed but, rather, the nature of the “social service” in which a convinced Christian should engage. They would generally have seen evangelism and social service as akin to two wings of an airplane. However, under the strains of the increasing prosperity in the late 1920s and then of the Depression in the 1930s, the “two wings” began to separate. John Webster Grant recounts being appointed, upon his ordination in 1943, to the Maritime Conference’s Committee on Evangelism and Social Service and seeing even then “an uneasy alliance in which enthusiasts for evangelism or temperance or socialism agreed

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<sup>12</sup> Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Naculturtion*, 298.

<sup>13</sup> Allen, *The Social Passion*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, updated and expanded (Burlington, ON: Welch Publishing Company, 1988), 121-122.

to support one another's resolutions in order to get their own adopted. In succeeding years the program has only suffered further fragmentation."<sup>15</sup>

Related to Grant's comment, the United Church's restructuring of the late 1960s to early 1970s eliminated boards, including the Board of Evangelism and Social Service. Responsibilities for both these areas were transferred to the newly created Division of Mission in Canada, resulting in the loss of the word "Evangelism" in the name of a key church committee. More significantly, the sense that evangelism should be connected with social service, albeit in an increasingly strained relationship, was now lost to view.

Third, the two decades immediately after the end of World War II represented a period of great conformity in Canadian society, including significant cultural conformity between church and society in English-speaking Canada. Protestant denominations, including the United Church, certainly made statements critical of various aspects of moral, political, or societal life. However, the more trenchant critiques of the social order during the 1930s (not to mention those of the 1970s and following), or the strong societal reform initiatives that had undergirded liberal evangelicalism and the push toward church union, seemed absent. In addition, Canada was becoming an increasingly secular society, and older patterns of response to, and interaction with, that society became less effective.

Finally, by the 1930s, the liberal theology that had helped to create and to support liberal evangelicalism was being replaced by neo-orthodox theology, a development that came to full fruition in the 1940s and 1950s. This point is not to imply that neo-orthodox theology failed to demand a committed life. But liberal theology's emphasis that one could and should help to bring the kingdom of God to earth, an idea that was such a powerful motivator for social reform, was no longer present.

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<sup>15</sup> John Webster Grant, "From Revelation to Revolution: Some Thoughts on the Background of the Social Gospel," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 12, No. 2 (1996): 164.

### **A Usable Legacy?**

Are there aspects of liberal evangelicalism that represent a usable legacy as we confront living in the early twenty-first century, when a lived practice of Christianity, or any other faith tradition for that matter, is a significantly counter-cultural activity? Two things strike me. One is intentionality in Christian formation, both our own and that in which we engage as a denomination. Such intentionality had been a significant part of the Victorian evangelical heritage and of the liberal evangelicalism that emerged from it. In an increasingly secular society, congregations need to provide resources to nurture the faith tradition in those who opt to stay after having been drawn to “check us out.” These individuals rarely have any knowledge of the Christian tradition. Even those of us with longer roots in the Church need to give attention to nurturing and developing our understanding of the faith tradition.

Second, liberal evangelicalism emphasized a life of service that arose from one’s Christian commitment and represented the exercise of that commitment in the world. The early twentieth century context in which liberal evangelicals functioned was an environment markedly different from ours. They lived and worked in a society in which most people professed Christian faith. Shaped by that society, they sought to restructure or reshape it so that it reflected more fully what they understood to be “Christian values.” They supported generously with time and money enterprises they judged could help make the culture and societal structures yet more reflective of Christian values.

Our context is obviously different. But the notion of the “intentional and well-lived life,” that is, a life lived in service, a life that in its living expresses the faith that underlies it and strengthens it, would be another usable and important inheritance from liberal evangelicalism. Indeed, it is a part of the liberal evangelical heritage that has been maintained to a considerable degree. Phyllis Airhart, in reflecting on the United Church’s seventy-fifth anniversary, noted a “civic piety that has characterized the United Church for much of its history.”<sup>16</sup> While Airhart

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<sup>16</sup> Phyllis Airhart, “A ‘Review’ of The United Church of Canada’s 75 Years,” *Touchstone* 18, No. 3 (2000): 28.

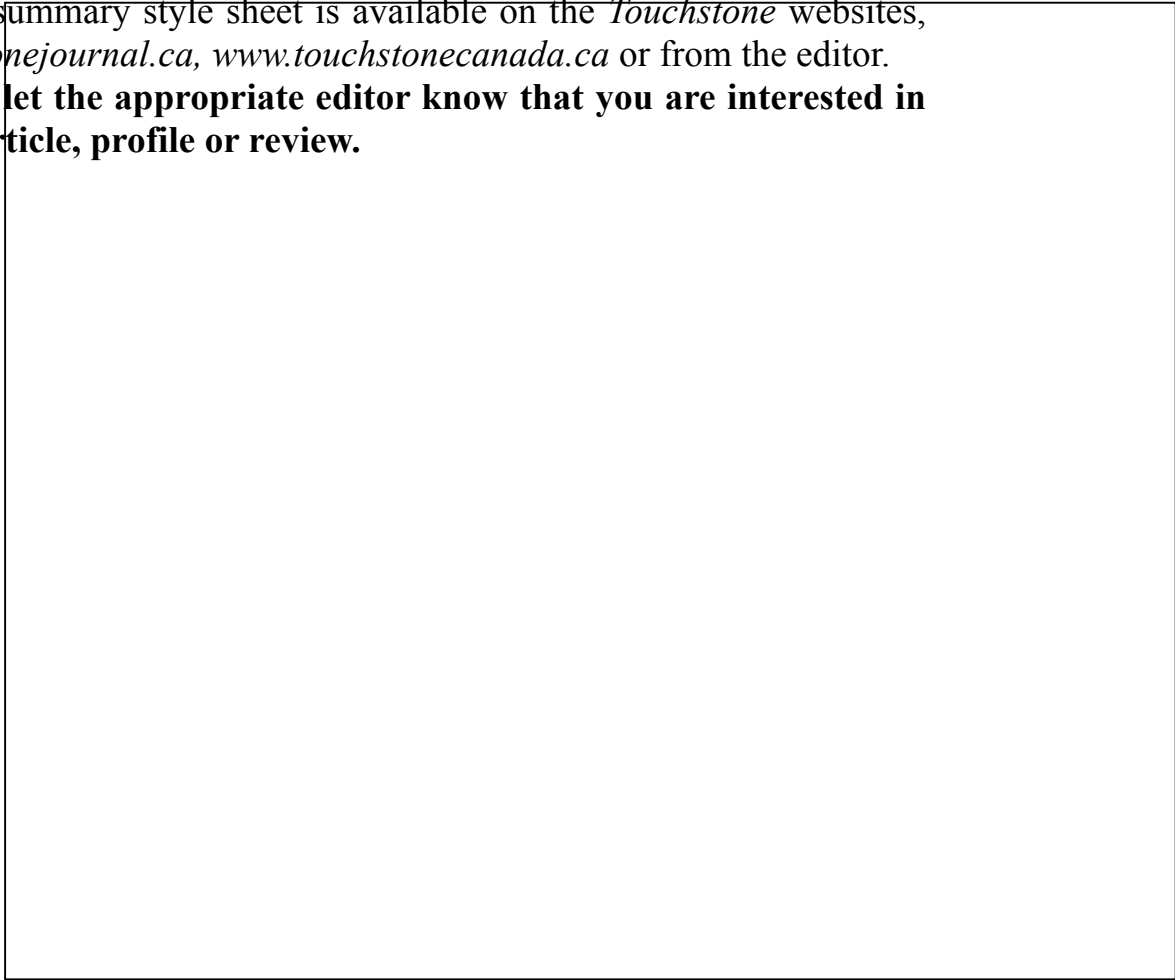
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coming numbers are:  
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2017: 500th Anniversary of Luther's 95 Theses, their role and place in Canadian society to exercise, through our living, the kind of influence our forebears enjoyed. But that does not mean that through the commitments of the United Church people and ministries, is included in each number. Profiles of important United Church figures, or of figures influencing faith we confess, we cannot have an impact on both the culture and the societal structures of our day. In addition, I doubt whether the challenges of rapid urbanization and waves of immigrants heading west would have seemed any less daunting to our forebears than the challenges of living faithfully in our day seem to us.

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# CANADIAN ECUMENICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE: A MOVEMENT OF PROPHETIC WITNESS

by Jennifer Henry

*Evidently God can “raise up prophets” and authorize prophetic voices and deeds in the fullness of God’s own freedom, anywhere, anytime, in any circumstance. If, however, we are to think from the human side of the matter, it will not surprise that some social environments are more hospitable than others to prophets and more likely to be the locus of their emergence.*<sup>1</sup>

In his seminal book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann speaks of communities that offer a kind of “natural habitat” of prophetic voices.<sup>2</sup> In my lifetime, the Canadian ecumenical social justice movement has been just such a place of prophetic witness, a community of communities striving to be “hospitable to prophets.”<sup>3</sup> In this reflection on the ecumenical social justice coalitions, now united in *KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives*, I will employ Brueggemann’s four characteristics of prophetic sub-communities as an interpretive lens: “long and available memory; expressed sense of pain; active practice of hope; and an effective mode of discourse.”<sup>4</sup> These characteristics find easy resonance in the ecumenical justice coalition history and its current trajectory in KAIROS.

## **The Emergence of the Ecumenical Coalitions**

In March of 1973, five national church leaders toured Canada under the banner “development demands justice,” advocating a new perspective on what was then called “Canada’s relations with the Third World.” This tour birthed the ecumenical coalition, *Ten Days for World Development*,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



with the creation of eleven other coalitions following, each emerging from a *kairos* moment of Canadian or global injustice. Whether it was coups, or pipelines, the pain of Sudan or Burma, the apparently intractable reality of apartheid or poverty, the coalitions were formed as the collective response of Canadian churches to the hard reality of injustice and pain, with the goal of offering comfort in solidarity, justice in advocacy and action towards hope. Those who birthed *The Inter-Church Coalition on Africa (ICCAF)*, *The Canada-Asia Working Group* and *GATT-Fly* (later *The Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice*), to name a few, understood the need to address the systems and structures that were causing the violence, poverty, or oppression. The coalitions—“concrete expressions of God’s grace in our history”<sup>5</sup>—were spurred on by faith that, even in contexts of deep fear and despair, belief in the resurrected Christ meant that life, freedom, and justice were still possible.

That spirit of the ecumenical social justice coalitions continues in KAIROS, whose name taps into a movement of related prophetic witness around the globe. In 2001, amid the crisis of declining church resources and the opportunity of the unifying vision of the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative (1998-2001), eleven churches and religious organizations formed KAIROS as a faithful ecumenical response to Micah 6:8. KAIROS brought eleven of the inter-church coalitions together, with the hope of living up to their legacy. In KAIROS, there is a continued encouragement for prophetic voices—institutional and those made marginal—who speak into the depth of injustice with both critique and constructive proposal. KAIROS seeks to animate a movement of prophetic witness consistent with the historic voices of the prophets and the radical call of the gospel. This aspiration leads to a stance of both yearning for the wellbeing of, and being in creative tension with, the dominant church community, while pushing and cajoling corporations and government towards a just and inclusive vision of Canada and our aching world.

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<sup>5</sup> Lee Cormie, “Seeds of Hope in the New World (Dis)order,” in *Coalitions for Justice: The Story of Canada’s Inter-Church Coalitions*, ed. Christopher Lind and Joe Mihevc (Ottawa: Novalis, 1994), 376.

### Long and Available Memory

In May of 2013, on a day dedicated to reflecting on forty years of ecumenical social justice, a veteran staff member shared experiences from the churches' solidarity with the Dene people in their opposition to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline. Drawing from the early days of the ecumenical coalition, *Project North*, John Dillon engaged in a dialogue with Kaitlin Duthi-Kanikatt, a young leader in KAIROS, offering perspective on the current challenge of the Northern Gateway Pipeline. In the room were many others with deep connections to the early story, such as former Member of Parliament Warren Allmand, Indian Affairs Minister of the time, and Gitxsan ancestral chief Ray Jones. One could feel the presence of the Spirit through this dialogue as elders made available powerful insights to the present generation to guide in strategies and actions.

This transmission of memory has been a strong characteristic of the coalitions, and was a precipitating factor for the KAIROS decision to mark the forty years of ecumenical social justice intentionally through events and worship services beginning in 2013. In this commitment to the memory of the justice work that has gone before—both in its challenges and triumphs—we infuse meaning into our day to day efforts, connecting them to a history of struggles that reaches out behind us and anticipates the future of struggles for justice before us. In the words of Elizabeth Johnson: “Memory that dares to connect with the pain, the beauty, the defeat, the victory of love and freedom, and the unfinished agenda of those who went before acts like an incalculable visitation from the past that energizes persons.”<sup>6</sup>

This kind of energizing memory was evident at the same gathering when Presbyterian elder Marjorie Ross, former staff member to the *Taskforce on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility* (TCCR), recalled a time when there was a sense of absolute defeat in the struggle against apartheid. She spoke of a day when she came into work and, hearing of more vicious violence, she sat down at her desk and burst into

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 165.

tears. Yet short months later the dam of injustice broke and apartheid began to be dismantled. Marjorie's testimony spoke to the hearts of all of us struggling today with apparently immovable injustice. Her message buoyed us: even when we think matters can never change, we must keep working and struggling, because they can; they do; they must.

This commitment to fuel insight and energy through memory extends beyond our own history to the invocation of the faith-based movements that have gone well before—anti-slavery, social gospel, civil rights—and beyond that to the movements of the early church, the Jesus movement, and the Exodus movement of the Hebrew people. Particularly in liturgies that have accompanied action, the ecumenical social justice movement has drawn consistently from the rich repository of narratives in Scripture and tradition, stories of grace-filled trouble-makers who sought to witness to their faith in words and acts of justice. For inspiration, humility, challenge, and renewal, the ecumenical social justice movement has striven to place itself in the continuum of others who have acted imperfectly but always with passion for the hopes and dreams of others, forging bonds with those stirred up by love and anger from biblical times to our own. This invocation of the communion of saints in the work of justice is a deep commitment to the One who has died, is risen, and will come again—because “the lives of all disciples and seekers in the Spirit, persons who reveal the face of God disfigured with suffering, alive with resistance and compassionate to heal” are “woven into the paradigmatically dangerous memory of Jesus.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Sense of Pain**

Brueggemann describes the second characteristic of prophetic sub-communities this way: access to “an available and expressed sense of pain that is owned and recited as a real social fact, that is visibly acknowledged in a public way, and that is understood to be unbearable for the long term.”<sup>8</sup> All of the coalitions that emerged, and every priority in the life of these coalitions, now KAIROS, have been visible witnesses

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 168.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, xvi.

to a sense of pain. When the coup rocked Chile on September 11, 1973, and fierce repression was unleashed against those who sought peace and human rights, Canadian Christians could not bear the thought of the risk these people now would be facing. So church folk came quickly together, urging Canada not to give legitimacy to the military junta, and pressing for a generous, swift acceptance of refugees in order to save lives. What emerged was the *Inter-Church Committee on Chile*, later the *Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America*, when its work expanded through the 80s in solidarity with those experiencing the pain of Central American repression.

*Project North*, later the *Aboriginal Rights Coalition*, took shape in 1975 when mega-projects were transforming the north of Canada, and Indigenous communities, on whose traditional territory these development projects were anticipated, were faced with grim choices. It was deep pain at the potential death of livelihood and identity, at the risk of ecological ruin, that led churches to respond in a new coalition. *Project North* was a vehicle for the churches' solidarity, an attempt to magnify the prophetic voice of the Dene so it would be heard by southern churches, the general public, and relevant governments.

The coalitions were responses of solidarity to people whose pain was acknowledged and felt, and then experienced as unbearable the more its character was known. The quick response to the Chile coup was directly related to friendships that had developed out of Canada-Chile church exchanges in an earlier time. Pain acknowledged as social fact requires response. One of the coalitions' failures was that some pain, closer to home, caused by ourselves, by our churches, took a very long time to be acknowledged.

In KAIROS the churches continue to name and respond to the expressed pain of others, whether they are in Fort Chipewyan or in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But there is also a shift as KAIROS strives now to make explicit pain that is not just "theirs" but "ours." As the movement has become more diverse and goes beyond a white, middle class identity, the "we" changes and those who continue to experience injustice, the pain of oppression, can be found in "our" midst. Indigenous peoples have challenged us to work *with*, and not *for*, them in

their struggles, recognizing that the “we” of the movement must be inclusive of Indigenous and settler alike, newcomer, old and young.

Even among those who are privileged there is new recognition of pain that transcends the usual categories that divide people. The current consumptive, extractive global economic regime hurts everyone and could be called a self-inflicted wound. When it deeply wounds God’s creation, none can be untouched. The pain of our alienation from the Earth and from God is “a real social fact” to be acknowledged in lament, and transformed through our witness and action.<sup>9</sup> Here the partnership in justice offered by Indigenous peoples for the healing of the earth is a generous and welcome invitation.

### **Active Practice of Hope**

Brueggemann also describes the prophetic community as knowing “about promises yet to be kept, promises that stand in judgment on the present.”<sup>10</sup> This has been evident from the first days of the coalitions: the vision arises not from an optimism that bears false witness, but from a hope rooted in the reality of injustice unmasked and in the promises of God. For the coalitions, and for KAIROS, “the final, God-given blessed future provides a point of reference to which present injustices stand in sharp contrast and can be named for the abominations they truly are.”<sup>11</sup> Those committed to the work of ICCAF and TCCR believed apartheid was antagonistic to God’s vision. Those who collaborated in the linkage of PLURA<sup>12</sup> believed poverty was a violation of God’s promise. *The Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice* and *The Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America*, *The Aboriginal Rights Coalition*, and what later became *Ten Days for Global Justice*, all expressed in their very names that possibility of another reality, one that necessitated prophetic critique of the status quo.

Within KAIROS there is a sense of con-spiring with God to make Christ’s promise of abundant life so for all. Indigenous people, women,

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<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, 217.

<sup>12</sup> The Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches.

and peoples' organizations in Latin America call abundant life *buen vivir*, or living well. In the context of the work on truth, reconciliation, and equity, residential school survivors talk no longer of survival but of thriving: "*thurvival*." Whatever the specific context, the ecumenical social justice movement has been privileged to attest how, out of the depth of struggle, a robust hope, not simply to survive, but to flourish, can be embodied in action. To such hope we are called in deep solidarity.

Hope has been one of the richest gifts of the ecumenical justice movement to other social movements: the absolute conviction that transformation must be possible. The coalitions were tangible signs of hope, imperfect and partial, but nonetheless a witness by church and community that transformation is possible. At KAIROS we continue to find our hope through engagement in struggle. It is our testimony to what can be: *buen vivir*.

### **Effective Mode of Discourse**

Memory, pain and hope thus far. Brueggemann's final characteristic is a "rich coding" that has resonance even "across generations."<sup>13</sup> Across the last forty years, across denominational divisions of polity and liturgical expression, the ecumenical justice movement has discovered common words, and spoken them together, in expressions of biblical and theological reflection and in ecumenical worship. Particularly in the last fifteen years there has been a discovery of the sense of power in connecting to what makes us distinct from other justice movements, however similar we might be in commitment to action. The *Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative* (CEJI) of 1998-2001 was a high point in speaking a distinctive language *together*. A collective church and coalition project to mark the millennium with renewed social action, "CEJI deliberately brought biblical reflection into creative tension with contemporary social analysis," and in so doing, "Jubilee memory came alive in our struggles."<sup>14</sup> It was more like singing than speaking, as when someone starts an old tune, barely remembering the words, and others

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<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann, xvi.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Henry, "Jubilee Activism: A Living Vision of Hope," in *Liberating Biblical Study*, ed. Laurel Dykstra and Ched Myers (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 107.

begin to sing along, reminding one another, together remembering more words than they thought they knew. Together, the concept of biblical Jubilee was reclaimed as a “radical justice hymn that belonged at the heart of our liturgies.”<sup>15</sup>

Reviewing the many educational and worship resources of the coalitions and KAIROS, one sees strong strands of common biblical texts. The beautiful passages from Isaiah 58 and 61, and the reaffirmation in Luke 4: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me”—such Jubilee words invoke release from bondage, redistribution of wealth, and renewal of the earth. Then add the great “Let justice roll down like waters” of Amos, Mary’s song of God’s lifting up and putting down, and Micah—always Micah—whose words form the mandate for KAIROS: “a faithful ecumenical response to the biblical call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God” (6:8). These all come from the dog-eared pages of our Common Book to unite and inspire.

And the vocabulary of common words continues to grow and change. KAIROS now speaks of “all my relations,” of “seven generations,” and of “Great Spirit”—rich ways we have learned to name truths we attempted to suppress. Phrases such as “voice for the voiceless” have been abandoned, as metaphorically and literally, KAIROS seeks to amplify and not replace the leadership of marginalized people.

### **Extraordinary, Unreasonable, and Bold**

The challenge for the next forty years is to sustain a movement from memory and out of pain, in hope and through words of common conviction, a task that will draw ecumenical advocates of justice into acts of resistance in our own time.<sup>16</sup> The current era is characterized by amnesia and by addiction to what dulls pain, by a false optimism about progress, and by a common language in consumerism. To be truly prophetic, the ecumenical justice movement must offer an alternative

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<sup>15</sup> Henry, 108.

<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann, xvi.

vision even while being susceptible to the demands of the dominant culture. Biblical communities struggled with the same tension and had the prophets to call them back. Prophets in our time—Indigenous communities living faithfully with the land, migrant workers resisting the commodification of their lives, Palestinian and Israeli peace activists who refuse to be enemies—these and so many others help call us back to faithful witness if we have ears to hear. These and other voices also may help us to reflect and learn from our failures. Gender and racial justice have not been so easily integrated into the common ecumenical call, and some justice issues still remain outside of the ecumenical sphere.

The “prophetic must be imaginative, because it is urgently out beyond the ordinary and the reasonable.”<sup>17</sup> The continued prophetic witness of the ecumenical justice movement will turn on its fidelity to the extraordinary, the unreasonable, and the bold. The ecumenical coalitions were out ahead of the curve and yet experienced benign toleration by governments. Now speaking out for justice—robust contributions to policy debate—can mean funding cuts, being shut out of government consultations, name-calling, and isolation for the ones who say the words that can no longer be said. This changed context requires boldness, a quality difficult to embrace with the challenges of survival faced by the denominations. But, day in and day out, we are inspired to maintain courage from those who refuse to let death be the last word. Partners of KAIROS, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Colombia, or in the Philippines, see their friends die in defence of human rights and still take the next step forward in justice, living testimony to the consistent scriptural witness to “fear not.” If our partners have courage in the face of tremendous hardship and risk, those of us who seek justice in Canada also must find our own courage.

Today, the ecumenical social justice movement stands between a robust past and an unknown future. We continue to be both the church as institution, with the integrity of a collective voice, and the church as movement, with people across the country stirred to join others in the faithful seeking of justice. We strive to live the present with all of the

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<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, xv.



boldness that fidelity to the gospel requires, but we experience repercussions and sometime lose our fire, courage, and way. We face new challenges, and we have mistakes from which to learn. Yet the future is one of promise and hope.

Dynamic young Indigenous people are offering leadership in our movement, choosing to walk with us, proud to facilitate our Blanket Exercise—a teaching tool that has found its *kairos* moment. More communities in pain and struggle, whether they are in the Philippines or in Northern Alberta, are seeking KAIROS out, believing that we can accompany them respectfully as they face injustices day to day, putting their fragile trust in us. More people are finding in KAIROS, whether it's through action for climate justice or through accompanying women of courage, a way to reclaim their faith and to show their love of God and neighbour. Global partners, communities that we have supported around the world, are offering back *their* solidarity, as we deal with our own injustices here, as through the Truth and Reconciliation process.

The ecumenical justice movement continues to attest the living and loving God, present as co-sufferer in injustice and pain, present as conspirator in acts of liberation and freedom, and present as co-creator in the confident promise of a new heaven and new earth. In tangible ways, KAIROS recognizes God in the *in-between* spaces that bring people together across various divides in solidarity and hope. Historically, the ecumenical justice movement saw the Divine in the connections made between the wealthier North and the global South, between those suffering on the front lines of oppression and injustice and those who could advocate for them in Canada. Now Great Spirit is revealed in tentative, but heartfelt, steps towards right relations with Indigenous peoples, in dialogues between the elders and the younger leaders who take up the ecumenical challenge with new passion, in relations between the church and emerging social movements, and in acts of reconciliation with the earth. Our word to the churches, to the social movements, and to ourselves is the absolute confidence that, with God working in us, God working among us, our dreams of justice, which are God's dreams of justice, can be, must be, and will be made real.

# THE COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES AT PELHAM COMMUNITY CHURCH

by Diane Walker

A few years ago the choir at Pelham Community Church went to sing at the final service of a United Church in a nearby city. Sadly, this is a ministry that has been exercised several times in recent years. During the social hour afterward, as I looked over a collection of memorabilia, I read an old newspaper story about the induction of a new minister, a man originally a candidate from the Pelham Church. I mentioned the story to a life-long member of Pelham and she said, “O, I remember when that happened. It was a very big event, a candidate from our little country church being called to a big, important city church.”

Times do change. Why are the big city churches disappearing and the little country churches still here? This is a great mystery; indeed the mystery of Christ and the church. But here are some musings on the current state of this little church, the roots in the past, and the present day fruit, an examination into the particular mysteries of a particular community of faith and its discipleship.

## Deep Roots

Pelham Community Church (PCC) was founded in 1848 as the *Kirche der Evangelischen Gemeinschaft* by families from the Schwarzwald who settled in Pelham, in the Niagara region of Canada West. There are some descendents of those original families in the congregation. Originally served by itinerant preachers, the congregation has been part of various circuits and pastoral charges. Since its founding, the church has belonged to four denominations and operated under seven official names; for a long time it was known locally simply as the German Church. The language of worship switched to English, seemingly seamlessly, about 1900. PCC was among the Evangelical United Brethren congregations uniting with the United Church of Canada in 1968. It became a one-point charge served by a part time minister in 1977. Once primarily a farming community, the area has experienced very modest population growth. PCC is situated in the country between a town and a village, each about three kilometres away; both are home to a United Church congregation.

The original 1850 building has been added onto roughly every thirty years. At present the construction of a major addition to the worship space is underway, expanding seating from about 120 to 300 plus. Both sanctuary and fellowship hall have been incorporated into the new multi-purpose space, complemented by an elevator and large foyer. The lower level of the building also has been expanded.

### **The Fit of Pastor and Congregation**

I'm in my fifteenth year at Pelham, and my 34<sup>th</sup> year of ordained ministry. This is my first full time pastoral charge since I left my settlement charge in 1984 to care full-time for my children; I'm the first woman minister to serve at Pelham.

I think of myself as United Church mainstream with a decidedly biblical, Trinitarian, and high christological orientation; maybe a bit to the theologically conservative side of the equation, but definitely in the mainstream. However, a colleague who is from a rather different place on the United Church spectrum laughed out loud (in a kind and friendly note of genuine amusement) when I made that observation at a meeting. The United Church takes great pride in its self image of inclusivity; so surely that means being able to include and celebrate pastors and congregations that operate out of a traditional theological perspective.

PCC and I are a good fit theologically, and I'm coming to the conclusion that fit is what matters. There is a lot of theological diversity in the United Church and the painful situations seem to occur when there isn't a good match between minister and congregation. That's not to say, however, that there isn't any diversity, theologically, at PCC—and we've certainly had some, ahem, interesting differences of opinion. But I would argue that a broadly interpreted unity of theological perspective within the congregation and with the minister smoothes the way to get on with forming disciples and releasing them to serve.

When I was called to Pelham after the years of child rearing, supply ministry, and part-time ministry, I was pretty excited to serve a church that described itself as “poised for significant growth and change.” In the years since, the experience has lived up to the billing. With some snapshot anecdotes, I'll present an overview of one particular locus of God's grace, among the disciples of Christ Jesus in one congregation.

## **Forming Disciples**

The formation of discipleship is a way of life for the congregation, with roots in generations of service. For example, there has always been a significant emphasis on ministry with children and youth. We have a full time, congregationally accountable minister (CAM) for children and youth, and that's a big commitment for a relatively small congregation of 130 supporting households. Our CAM runs outstanding programs including weekly junior and senior youth groups, a children's Christmas musical (rehearsals for which start in September), and our Sunday morning children's programs. Christian camping continues to be a significant influence on the congregation. Ten years ago we initiated and still provide oversight and support for a presbytery-funded travelling Vacation Bible School. Two teams criss-cross the Niagara Peninsula to put on a first-rate week of fun, Scripture, crafts, games and snacks in fourteen churches over the summer. The supervision of the program is a major commitment for the congregation.

Adult faith formation has a long history with camp meetings, revival preaching, adult Sunday school as a foundation, and the contemporary manifestations of adult Bible study and book study groups. At present we are using a resource from Zondervan called "The Story," a thirty-one week, all-congregation journey through the Bible.

Discipling is woven into the fabric of the congregation's life, and much is "caught" rather than taught. A general mood of willingness and ability to talk about our faith and pray together is actively reinforced. Testimony is a significant part of life together. For example, in worship there are often reports from the faith in action front. In the last few weeks a group reported on their food-sorting project at Open Arms Mission in Welland; another team described being part of the "Coldest Night of the Year" fundraiser; the junior youth shared the story of their annual retreat; and the seventeen adults and teens, who travelled to Nicaragua with *Compañeros*, sent some advance photos with a full report to come in April.

The wave of short-term mission trips (or, as they coming to be known, global service learning projects) has had a big impact at PCC. Starting with a men's mission group to Guatemala for a well drilling

project, we've had at least ten groups travel in the last fifteen years. Participating individuals always pay (or fund-raise) for their own expenses, but the congregation enthusiastically supports fundraisers and makes donations; in at least one case there was direct sponsorship as an individual paid the full cost for a younger man without means to go. Also, prayer support is critical. The "signs following after" these ventures have been notable in the areas of faith development, personal stewardship, community building, and congregational vitality.

These ventures contribute to a high level of activity and commitment that is out of proportion to the actual size of the congregation. There are very few people connected to the church (except for the "super seniors"—over-85s) who don't have some kind of responsibility at the church. All ages are involved in serving projects, everything from junior seniors (under-85s) in the choir to junior youth baking cookies for the once-a-month meal PCC puts on in a city church's *Out of the Cold* program. One of the very positive effects of this level of activity is that it seems to sap the energy that otherwise might go into the conflict, backbiting, meddling, gossip, and empire-building—behaviours that can cause such disastrous divisions in a faith community. Indeed, idle hands (and hearts) are the devil's workshop.

Another factor that frees up energy for serving Jesus is that there is no fund-raising done for the church budget. Lots of money gets raised by traditional fund-raising methods, but it's for giving away or for "extras" like bussing to youth events, camperships, assistance for ministry candidates, or big ticket items like a dishwasher. This is reflective of the motto of the Evangelical United Brethren: "As much for others as for ourselves."

### **The Elixir of Flexibility**

Flexibility and willingness to adapt to change are key in congregational life, and are, I believe, rooted in a profound trust in God's directing, flowering in a willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit. Here are two examples of that adaptability and generosity of spirit, one internal and one external.

Over a period of several years, there were experiments in alternative worship formats, including the adoption of contemporary music led by a

worship band. The transition has now settled into a curious hybrid I call “eclectic indigenous”: a service that includes a choir anthem, praise songs, testimony, Scripture, hymns, sermon, the occasional drama or video presentation and monthly communion, with anointing for healing offered. When we were at one critical stage in the transition process, one of our dear elder saints spoke to me about the changes: “You know I don’t really like this music we’re doing now. But I look at our church and I see those young people playing their instruments and the families coming in with their children and I say to myself, ‘Jean, you just look at your church. What does it matter what you like?’”

If I could bottle that attitude and sell it as an elixir to conflicted churches, I could probably retire on the proceeds. Flexibility, generosity of spirit, and willingness to accommodate others’ tastes, needs and aspirations: that’s gold, solid gold.

The external example relates to what is our biggest single serving project to date, the construction of a pre-school and a school at a children’s home in Swaziland. It all started when a visitor to the church, a daughter of members, talked over a handshake after worship. She described meeting the home’s founder and director at an AIDS conference. Intrigued and thinking back to the days in my own life when I was buying forty litres of milk a week, I asked where the money came from for a home with dozens of children. She described plans to establish a poultry operation which would generate income. The estimated cost was \$100,000. Just that morning, we had had a brief congregational meeting to affirm the decision to cancel plans to put a small addition on the church for offices, and instead convert the manse next door to office and meeting space. The estimated cost for the small addition had risen to over \$80,000 (which in real dollars is \$100,000).

It was immediately clear that a chicken operation for orphaned children would be a lot more fun than a boring office addition. Within a couple of weeks it emerged that the centre needed a school and a pre-school more than the chicken operation, and very quickly the opportunity was seized. We took the \$100,000 that we hadn’t yet raised and committed it to the project. A businessman on the small planning committee told us we needed to increase the goal to \$150,000 to cover extras and overages. O, those businesspeople: they want to talk real

dollars, not church-enthusiasm dollars. A goal of \$150,000 was set. The congregation committed to covering all administrative costs so that every dollar donated went directly to building the schools.

Then the desire to go and participate in the building began to blossom. People started to discern and pray, and three teams committed to go, in relays, the following summer. Between what participants paid or raised, and what was donated for the school project, over a period of about five months, \$410,000 came in—and we met the local budget too. Since then others have gone as individuals or groups from the congregation for varying lengths of time to help out at the home.

It all started with a coffee hour conversation that within a year culminated in a school dedication on the other side of the world—both other sides, actually, the north-south and east-west “other sides.” And while that might look like something out of left field, it is actually highly consistent with the congregation’s values and ethos as articulated in its mission, vision, and values statements, regularly assessed through an annually updated strategic plan. When the opportunity came along, the requisite flexibility and adaptability in the congregation and its leadership allowed the idea to blossom and then produce fruit.

In the context of mainline churches, flexibility and adaptability can have differing manifestations. Congregations can be extremely “progressive” in the area of theology, discarding traditional concepts of sin and salvation, the divinity of Christ, the authority and even utility of Scripture. But progressive theology is sometimes paired with a strict conservatism in regard to the forms, such as worship format, or the centrality of organ music, or adherence to a complex board and committee structure.

The contrasting reality is a congregation that is progressive and flexible about forms, adopting new styles of music, dropping events or customs when they no longer accomplish their purposes, while maintaining and celebrating the “faith once delivered to the saints.”

Flexibility at PCC has taken many forms. For example, it is clearly acknowledged that virtually all of the women of pre-retirement age work outside the home and so old traditions about “home cooked” food fade away. When the pot luck starts to shift from being a blessing to a burden (who will be home in time to make a casserole?) we order pizza. When

it's clear that guys want to be with guys sometimes, a men's group emerges, one that starts early enough in the morning that you can still get there and get to work on time. We work hard to adhere to term limits on committees and teams so that we don't burden people with church jobs to pile on top of job jobs and house jobs and kid jobs.

### **Grace Pre-eminent**

But most important, this is a community that runs on God's grace. I know it's what drives me as a pastor. I didn't come from a churched background. I was sent to Sunday school and found there welcome, acceptance, affirmation, and a different way of life. I got loved into the Kingdom. God's grace, the beautiful gift of salvation in Christ Jesus, the abundant life in this life, and the place at the Father's table in the life to come: these are the compelling truths in my life. And maybe it's pure intellectual laziness on my part, but I have always operated on the assumption that when I'm blessed, I want others to have what I've got. In ministry, nothing has given me more joy than to witness people being graced with their hearts' desires: when the longed-for partner appears, the hoped-for baby comes, the cancer is driven back, the job landed, the school admission offered, and the spot on the competitive team won. Because to know Christ and his benefits has been the richest treasure in what has been an unbelievably blessed life, I want others to know that same blessing.

So I preach grace: this is my story; this is my song. We had a man come to the church for a while from one of the really big churches in the area. Originally from a very strict, practically punitive sect, he carried church-shaped wounds. When he found his way to us I couldn't figure out what he was doing in our little, not all that hip, homey church. He came via the website, the old one that I thought dated and stodgy. When I asked if what he found at Pelham was consistent with the image portrayed on the website, and he said it was, I felt a little pang. But as he told his story, his life-long battle with debilitating depression, the guilt and the shame he felt about his life, I felt a dawning realization. I knew what had drawn him to Pelham: it's grace, grace all the way down, amazing grace that we lost are found, we blind now see, and our fetters fall.



We are in the grace business, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It's all we have to offer. To paraphrase my friend Connie den Bok: Starbucks has better coffee, the community centre has better programs, the Y has better facilities, the concert hall has better music: All we have is Jesus Christ.

We exist to serve as agents of Christ's grace—so there had better be grace in a congregation. Grace in the way you are greeted, and remembered the next time. Grace, not glare, when your baby howls or your toddler drops his clattering toy, or your sullen teen won't look anyone in the eye. Grace when you get divorced, or inconveniently pregnant, or go into treatment for addiction, or get arrested.

Grace is what keeps me going when I close one eye and look at the general fund deficit and when we live through a construction project that had us worshipping in a space not entirely closed off from the elements. Grace is what makes it possible to witness wonderful congregants move away, or more painfully, drift away.

God's grace has rained down on this congregation in many forms over generations of prayerful service. That grace abides through every kind of change imaginable: from the introduction of indoor plumbing; to the replacement of pews with chairs; from the arrival, and subsequent exit, of the organ; to who knows what change awaits us all following the General Council decisions of 2015. And it is always, always, grace enough. Thanks be to God.

## MERCIFULNESS IN A “PHILANTHROPIC” AGE

by David Lappano

*“Because the world understands only about money—and Christ only about mercifulness.”<sup>1</sup>*

There is much talk these days about charity and philanthropy. Peter Buffett, son of famed philanthropist, Warren Buffett, writes: “Philanthropy has become the ‘it’ vehicle to level the playing field and has generated a growing number of gatherings, workshops and affinity groups.”<sup>2</sup> One example is a movement called Effective Altruism, made up mostly of young professionals throughout the UK and North America. They proclaim a modern gospel of personal financial commitment to high impact charities recommended by organizations such as GiveWell<sup>3</sup> and Charity Navigator.<sup>4</sup> These organizations exist with the sole purpose of analyzing data, evaluating, and recommending the “most effective” charities for donors. Peter Singer’s book, *The Life You Can Save*, is the manifesto and theoretical source for Effective Altruism. And, as this book’s title suggests, Effective Altruism would make messiahs of everyone who tithes to GiveWell’s top charities list.

Apparently such messiahs are among us today. Of course, there are greater and lesser messiahs, according to how much and how effective their contributions are. Warren Buffett, Bill Gates and George Soros regularly top philanthropic lists. Though Peter Singer is not himself among the *uber* rich, he is certainly the admired intellectual champion of contemporary charitable theory. These *men*,<sup>5</sup> and many others like them, are often spoken of in the media, or from the pulpits and podiums, as models of the highest ethical generosity, whom each of us ought to imitate

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations attributed to Kierkegaard in this article are found in Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 318.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Buffett, “The Charitable-Industrial Complex,” *The New York Times*, 26 July, 2013. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/opinion/the-charitable-industrial-complex.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/opinion/the-charitable-industrial-complex.html?_r=1). Viewed March 2015.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.givewell.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.charitynavigator.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> Forbes’ “America’s 50 Top Givers” list includes one woman, Shelby White, at number 48. Where women are named, including Mrs. White, their philanthropy is associated with their spouse’s business. See <http://www.forbes.com/special-report/2013/philanthropy/top-givers.html>.

with our own, comparatively microscopic wealth. These philanthropists, or philanthrocapitalists,<sup>6</sup> are touted as models of success—they have the acumen and wisdom to amass great wealth; they are touted as models of effectiveness—they are prudent, efficient and objective about their aims; and they are touted as models of generosity—they give a lot of their money to charity. They are cited as examples of what can and must be done in order to transform the harsh realities of existence into life-affirming opportunities. But I suggest that we, particularly in the church, reject the valorization of wealth and power associated with the new philanthropy as a means for overcoming injustice, and that we refrain from offering our admiration and accolade to those (whether charities or philanthropists) who simply amaze us with the biggest amount or the greatest effect.

I will not deny that the charities promoted by GiveWell are working hard to overcome enormous suffering caused by easily preventable afflictions like malaria and gastronomic worms, but there is a shadow side to today’s bourgeois philanthropic movements, which was already evident in appeals for charity over a century ago. The philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard draws attention to one such concern in *Works of Love*. There he offers a warning to our modern age: “Woe to him who devours the inheritance of widows and the fatherless, but woe also to the preacher who is silent about mercifulness in order to talk about generosity!”<sup>7</sup>

What is the source of tension between mercifulness and generosity? Kierkegaard’s nineteenth-century church-going audience is familiar with the biblical command to “do good works and to share,” but he warns, “Do not forget either that this incessant talk . . . about beneficence and benevolence and generosity and charitable donations and gift upon gift is almost merciless.”<sup>8</sup> How can generosity be merciless? Normally we think of generosity as “doing good,” yet he imagines that the poor, who hear these appeals for charity or read the many celebrations of today’s philanthropists, must sigh. Kierkegaard explains that the poor person’s

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Bishop and Michael Green, *Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World and Why We Should Let Them* (London: A & C Black, 2008.) See also Matthew Bishop’s article in *The Huffington Post*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-bishop/philanthrocapitalism-yes\\_b\\_163253.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-bishop/philanthrocapitalism-yes_b_163253.html).

<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, 315.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

sigh is not for dramatic effect, to get the rich to open their purses; it is because “just when one is so eager to help him the greatest wrong is done to him.”<sup>9</sup> The greatest wrong is to imagine that certain people or a segment of society is somehow incapable of humanly supporting and building up others, or incapable of providing the solutions for overcoming injustice merely because some are unable to contribute large sums of money. “As if poverty and misery not only needed money etc. but also were excluded from the highest, from being able to practice mercifulness, because they are excluded from being able to be generous.”<sup>10</sup>

Discussions about charity or philanthropy inevitably divide all relationships into two categories: people are either benefactors or beneficiaries. These are unequal relationships, akin to debtor and creditor. In a world of these scenarios, the highest ethical accolade somehow always goes to the benefactors, those who *give* much and have power to *do* much. And if this is true, that the poor are regarded solely as needy in their poverty, then it is not surprising that they are “abandoned by the world’s conception of [their] ability to practice mercifulness,” and are “singled out, given up, as pitiable object[s] . . . who at most [are] able to bow and thank—if the rich person is so kind” as to be charitable.<sup>11</sup> And while the persistent existence of poverty and misery is appalling, and while the reluctance of the affluent to part with their wealth, or their ambivalence toward the poor is appalling, Kierkegaard insists “it would be much more appalling if we constrained poverty . . . because we were atrociously unfair to poverty and misery by not telling that *they* are able to practice mercifulness.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Kierkegaard asks us to reflect on mercy rather than the kind of celebration of power and wealth that emerges within a liberal (*bourgeois*) ethic of generosity. Mercifulness, Kierkegaard believes, circumvents the unequal dynamic of benefactors and beneficiaries because mercifulness is a work of love even if it has *nothing to give* and can *do nothing*.

A critic might say, “No help comes from no wealth, more help comes from more wealth, and the most help comes from the most wealth. So how does one do the most good? By giving the most wealth.” Our

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<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, 315.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 316.

critic might even appeal to Kierkegaard’s religious conviction and add, “In the parable about the Samaritan we are told that he put the wounded man on a donkey he *owns*, took the man to an inn, and *paid* for the wounded man to be cared for” (Luke 10: 30-36). Margaret Thatcher famously made this point in an interview when she said, “No-one would remember the good Samaritan if he’d only had good intentions; he had money as well.”<sup>13</sup> Thatcher’s ideology adheres to the following maxim: first one must generate wealth and means for oneself, and then one is free and able to generate an ethical world view. Or put slightly differently, in our world money is the powerful and decisive vehicle *through which* good works are actualized.

This logic is not without precedent in the Christian tradition. Recall John Wesley’s sermon 50 on the use of money. Reflecting on the admonition of Luke 16:9, “make unto yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness,” he encourages his audience to *gain* all they can, *save* all they can, and *give* all they can.<sup>14</sup> Here was a sermon that intended to overreach the centuries-held custom of tithing as a basis for charitable giving and inspire a more religiously holistic vision of money, linking work and service, personal acquisition, and social responsibility. Although Wesley outlines a number of provisos and restrictions for the acquisition and uses of money, and although gaining and saving mean nothing unless one then gives *all one can*, he does provide a definite order whereby good works follow after much is gained. For Wesley, as for Scripture, it is the love of money and not money itself that is the root of evil. Thus, “money is of unspeakable service to all civilized nations” and can do “all manner of good.” Money is “food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked,” and it is “a defence for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain.” In other words, money and wealth mediate the entire effort to do good works, to achieve ethically the highest for others and oneself. Eliminate “gain all one can” and it would be

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret Thatcher, quoted in a TV interview for London Weekend Television, *Weekend World*, 6 January 1980.

<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=104210>. Viewed March 2015.

<sup>14</sup> John Wesley, “Sermon 50: The Use of Money, 1744,” *Wesley Center Online*, Northwest Nazarene University © 1993-2011. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-50-the-use-of-money/>. Viewed March, 2015.

impossible for Wesley to speak of “giving all one can.” This is as far as the world can think. It is evident in Thatcher’s comment about the Samaritan and it is evident in society’s praise for philanthropists and philanthrocapitalism.

Effective Altruism, unconsciously following Wesley, also encourages people to increase their wealth in order to give. This has spawned the initiative of “Earning to Give” and an organization called *80000 Hours*, which coaches aspiring philanthropists toward choosing careers that will allow them to be effective donors.<sup>15</sup> Take, for example, the 2013 article in *The Washington Post* titled, “Join Wall Street. Save the World.”<sup>16</sup> It celebrates “an emerging class of young professionals” who believe that “making gobs of money is the surest way to save the world.” The message here is: keep earning money, the more the better, but not for yourself—it is for the most effective charities. Others speak of tithing and percentages—but it remains the larger amount that is most important. When 80% of a small amount is less than 1% of a large amount it is the 1% that people look to, which has the spectacular power to *do the most*. That is why much attention is given to people like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett,<sup>17</sup> because, as Kierkegaard points out, “the world’s generosity would rather deal with the large sums that amaze.”

There are at least two problems with this benevolence from wealth. The first involves much-needed critical thought about how wealth is accrued, and what kind of system encourages not only obvious material disparity, but which also encourages unequal economic relationships. Here it should be noted that Wesley’s sermon addresses some of these concerns. In fact, realizing Wesley’s vision for the proper accumulation and use of money would bring contemporary capitalism to a screeching halt, both from the side of production and consumption. No “philanthrocapitalist” and few global development charities could adhere to Wesley’s proscriptions against usury, credit, and debt (which is the

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<sup>15</sup> <https://80000hours.org/career-guide/>. Peter Singer explicitly states it in his TED Talk. At 9:15 he endorses taking on lucrative jobs in finance in order to be able to give effectively.

<sup>16</sup> Dylan Matthews, “Join Wall Street. Save the World,” *The Washington Post*, 31 May 2013. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/05/31/join-wall-street-save-the-world/>. Viewed March, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> In Peter Singer’s famous TED Talk he declares that Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffet are “the most effective altruists in history.” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Diuv3XZQXyc>).

engine of every financial market today). Nor could they accumulate wealth while adhering to the kind of labour justice and labour freedom Wesley advocates. In other words, what would have been regarded by Wesley as a pragmatic approach would today resemble something more like utopian radicalism, and given the present situation of global capitalism I believe he would be forced to re-evaluate his “neutral” stance to “mammon of unrighteousness.”

The second problem to which Kierkegaard points is this, that incessant talk and calculations about how much is given and how much is done distracts attention from what is essential—that mercifulness is practised. It is important to understand that Kierkegaard does not want to abandon charity or generosity. He believes that “if a merciful person has something to give he gives it more than willingly.”<sup>18</sup> But he insists, perhaps against all enlightened wisdom and prudence, that our focus should not be on the *something* that is given—which is a “more” or “less” measurement. Instead, Kierkegaard provides us with the religious occasion to think beyond the common calculations and attend to mercifulness, which is possible for anyone—even if one has gained nothing. “*Being able* to be merciful certainly is a far greater perfection than to have money and then *to be able* to give.”<sup>19</sup> And, if we follow Kierkegaard’s thinking, it is mercifulness rather than simply charitable giving that brings people closer to the weightier matters of justice and equity and integrity. But in order to demonstrate this, Kierkegaard believes it is necessary to separate mercifulness from money.

We are told a story with a recognizable theme. Imagine a rich man dies and now stands face to face with eternity. Before the rich man can proceed to his infinite peace he is asked by eternity whether he has been merciful. He answers proudly and assuredly, “I have given a hundred thousand to the poor!” But, Kierkegaard says, “Eternity will look at him in amazement, like someone who cannot comprehend what he is talking about, and will once again put the question to him.”<sup>20</sup> The problem is not that the rich man gave the wrong answer—that he should have said a hundred *million* rather than a hundred *thousand*. The problem is the rich

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<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard, 317.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

man did not actually answer the question. The hundred thousand, whatever the amount, is unrelated to mercifulness. He simply offered no evidence of mercifulness.

For Kierkegaard, mercifulness is totally unrelated to money. To illustrate his point, he asks us to imagine a slight change to the biblical story about the Good Samaritan. “If that man . . . had come not riding but walking along the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, where he saw the unfortunate man lying, if he had been carrying with him nothing with which he could bind up his wounds, if he had then lifted up the unfortunate man, laid him on his shoulders, and carried him to the nearest inn, where the innkeeper refused to receive either him or the unfortunate one because the Samaritan did not have a penny, could only beg and beseech this hard-hearted man to be merciful since a man’s life was involved . . . if now the Samaritan, far from losing patience over this, had gone away carrying the unfortunate man, had sought a softer resting place for the wounded one, had sat by his side, had done everything to staunch the flow of blood—but the unfortunate one died in his hands—would he not have been equally as merciful . . . or is there some objection to calling this the story about the merciful Samaritan?”<sup>21</sup>

Here is a person who gave nothing and was not very effective—the wounded man died! But it doesn’t matter if everything is done for a person or if what seems like nothing effective is being done. “Mercifulness is *how* this everything and this nothing are done.”<sup>22</sup> It expresses the capacity to orient our life to the wellbeing of others regardless of the resources at our disposal. Mercifulness ventures something. It ventures out into the deep with others. It says your wellbeing and my wellbeing are irrevocably bound together and it proves this not with spectacular actions and large sums, but through mundane and regular attentiveness.

Where mercifulness is the issue, then, it is the person who gives of herself. It is not giving away oneself, discarding oneself, or becoming an object to be recklessly used by others. Rather, mercifulness is to give of oneself lovingly. And this can be done if one is somehow “debilitated” or if one is “able bodied.” This article speaks, mostly, in the language of

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<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard, 317.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 327-328.



wealth and poverty, but that is too restricting. Our discussion here also applies to common assumptions that disregard or patronize the mercifulness of the disabled, or the elderly and children.

If generosity in the form of charity and philanthropy is regarded as the highest that a person can ethically do for others then the fate of the world is in the hands of the mighty and wealthy. They claim for themselves the responsibility of healing the world and thereby also claim the glory when they believe they have done so. It is as if our existence played out the plot of a superhero movie: a helpless crowd of people waits with worried faces in their homes or on the streets while the superheroes fly around above us, exerting their powers to save us from some impending doom. Think about recent Hollywood films. Characters like Iron Man and Batman are immensely wealthy entrepreneurs who claim to have the authority and the responsibility to save cities from themselves. Superman (a variation on the theme) is the expression of an explicit desire for an alien messiah. Generosity without mercifulness celebrates power, *superpowers*. It marvels at the spectacular action that grips our senses.

Mercifulness exposes power *by contrast*. It does so quietly and without much stirring. Kierkegaard gives us another example on which to reflect. We are asked to think of a widow in poverty whose only daughter is both physically and financially unable to alleviate her mother’s condition. “Imagine this unfortunate girl, who sighs under the heavy burden, that she, according to the slight capacity granted to her, is inexhaustibly inventive in order to do the little bit, the nothing she is able to do, to alleviate her mother’s life. See, this is mercifulness.” But Kierkegaard shows us the contrast: “every time the prominent protector who is her mother’s support comes to visit, the poor girl is put to shame, because *he*, he can do so much—his mercifulness [generosity] overshadows the girl’s mercifulness! Well, yes, in the eyes of the world.”<sup>23</sup> This is how mercifulness escapes the calculation of “effectiveness”—its operation is stealthily under the radar of instruments that pay attention to sure results and large amounts.

Mercifulness is radically different from power. Power and might “so easily disturbs the mind; you become amazed at the externals. But if you are amazed, then you can be sure that it is not mercifulness that you are

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<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard, 325.

seeing.” Instead, mercifulness has the ability to make “the deepest inward impression” on those who look for it.<sup>24</sup>

Kierkegaard reminds us that *our* common understanding of power and authority is always a semblance of power and authority, and as such it is always tentative and truly fragile (that is why so many cling to it desperately and others covet it manically). In this way mercifulness unsettles the sensible-rational understanding of generosity, which believes that its abundance and effectiveness are evidence of its greatness. Mercifulness, by contrast, draws our attention away from power, away from the superheroes, and allows us to focus on each other, on what we can do together and do ourselves.

At the beginning of this article I made a forceful denunciation of the dominant discourse today that endorses the heroes and structures of corporate wealth, along with their techno-scientific prowess, as models of ethical living. I also understand that the continual appeals for charity are well founded, and borne of a true desire to make a significant difference to the existing conditions of so many people. And that is why we ought to attend to what is truly significant: “Mercifulness is the truly *significant*; the hundred thousand or doing everything in a worldly way is the *significant* gift, the *significant* help. But the one significance is that which is to be looked *at* [mercifulness]; the other significance is that which is to be looked *away from* [the gift]. Therefore, out of mistrust of yourself, you want to get rid of that from which you are to look away.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, mercifulness is like “a dangerous protest” that has “the power to alarm the rest of us,”<sup>26</sup> to make the moneyed philanthropists ashamed and blush, to “make [them] willing to give and yet unwilling to make the confession that it is charity,” to make them ashamed of “having *others see* that [they] get honor” from giving money.<sup>27</sup>

Because the dispossessed are not disadvantaged when it comes to mercifulness, it truly expresses human equality. And this recalibrates how we can think about *being able* to give and to work for the wellbeing of others.

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<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard, 329-330.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 316-317.

## FROM THE HEART

### FAITH AND “THE OPTION FOR THE POOR”

by Gregory Baum

I first heard of the Canadian Social Gospel in the early 1940s at the McMaster Christian Union. We occasionally discussed articles sent to us by the Student Christian Movement (SCM)—to which we did not belong. At that time McMaster was a Baptist university that disapproved of the liberal Christian orientation fostered by the SCM. At the university I was not mature enough to be moved by the social gospel: I was wrestling with my own personal problems. Then, on January 1, 1946, I started to read *The Confessions* of St. Augustine, a book that touched me deeply, made me think, and taught me to pray. The book transformed my life, making the seeking of God my primary preoccupation. I eventually joined the Catholic Church and entered a religious order, the Augustinians, saying good-bye to my worldly interests. This *fuga mundi*, this indifference to what happens in the world, lasted for several years. Still, in my theological studies I was thrilled by the ecumenical movement and decided to write my doctoral dissertation on an ecumenical topic.

I had the great honour of being appointed an official theologian at the Secretariat for Christian Unity of the Second Vatican Council. The optimistic mood of the 1960s affected the Council, left its mark on the conciliar document, “The Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et spes*), and had an impact on my understanding of the human vocation. Since the Council urged Catholics to become socially involved in the reform of society, I now became a liberal (in the European sense).

This led to a conversation I have never forgotten. I had become friends with Paolo Ricca, a young Waldensian minister, working as a journalist at the Council. He was not impressed by *Gaudium et spes* and its reformist orientation. “This is liberal stuff,” he said to me. Since I was ignorant of political science at that time, I did not understand what he meant. To be liberal is a good thing, I said to him. Later I understood that the Waldensians in Italy, persecuted by the Catholic Church over the centuries, adopt a critical stance toward their society and vote in great numbers for the Communist Party. My friend rejected liberalism because he was a socialist.

My own conversion to the Left happened in 1969. At that time I studied sociology at the New School in New York. I was profoundly affected by Latin American liberation theology and the declarations of the Latin American Bishops Conference of 1968 at Medellin, Columbia. More important perhaps was my friendship with Rosemary Ruether, intense at that time, which forced me to wrestle with the meaning of the gospel for our social existence. Many years later Karl Rahner said that we are not fully converted to the gospel until we re-situate ourselves in the society to which we belong. The great difference between liberals and leftists is that only the latter denounce the “beast” that produces the oppression, exploitation, and colonization that destroy human lives.

Becoming a theologian of the Left was a spiritual and intellectual struggle, obliging me to re-think my relationship to society and my perspective on the history and culture of the West. I look upon my conversion as a gift of God.

The Latin American liberation theologians call this a conversion to “the preferential option for the poor,” an expression adopted by the Latin American Bishops Conference of 1979 at Puebla, Mexico. Reading the New Testament in solidarity with the masses of the poor, these Latin American Catholics became keenly aware that Jesus himself was in solidarity with the people of the land, marginalized and despised by the religious elites, and oppressed by the colonial rule of the Roman Empire. Jesus stood against the high priests of the temple who served the colonial ruler by urging the people to remain calm and obedient. Jesus proclaimed the coming of a new reign, different from the reign of Caesar, at odds with the dominant values, incarnating love, justice and peace.

To become a follower of Jesus in Latin America, these Catholics believed that one has to choose to align oneself with the option for the poor. This option has two dimensions: i) to look upon society and culture from the perspective of the poor (a cognitive task), and ii) to give public witness of solidarity with the struggle of the poor for social justice (an active task). The option is called “preferential” because it is the first step towards the creation of a just and humane society, in which solidarity will include even pharaoh now deprived of his dominion.

I found this option deeply convincing. It differs from the option for the proletariat and the option for the nation, inasmuch as “the poor” is a

dynamic category: it demands research in every society and its global connections as to who the poor and oppressed are. The option for the poor has an affinity with the option of Jesus for the people of the land, but is not identical with it. It did not occur to the biblical authors—nor could it in their society—that people were destined to be the creators of a just society; to become the subjects of their history. The prophetic voices in the Bible urged the king or the rulers to promote justice and peace; they did not urge the people to become the responsible agents of their own future. The emancipatory dimension of the preferential option is derived, not from the Bible, but from the Enlightenment. Because of this connection to a secular tradition, it is important to affirm that, from a Christian point of view, a people's struggle for greater justice is not a Promethean project of self-redemption, but a response to a divine call.

The option for the poor opens the door to a new spirituality. As we turn to God we refuse to forget the victims of oppression; we discover a new meaning of the Cross; and we find a peace in God that makes us ever restless. In my writings I call this “dancing with a wounded leg.”

In the 1970s and early 80s, the Canadian Catholic bishops embraced the option for the poor. In their pastoral statement of 1976, “From Words to Action,” they write:

As disciples of Christ, all of us have the responsibility to play a role in the creation of the social order based on justice. We stand in the biblical tradition of the prophets of Israel (Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah) for whom to know God is to seek justice for the disinherited, the poor and the oppressed. The same Spirit of God that came upon the prophets filled Jesus of Nazareth . . . In the light of that Spirit he announced that he was the message of the prophets come true, —“the good news to the poor” and “liberty to the oppressed” (Luke 4: 18,19) . . . For the Christian community this struggle for justice is not an optional activity. It is integral to bringing the Gospel to the world.

In their statement of 1981, “Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis,” the bishops write:

The principle [of our thought] has to do with the preferential option for the poor, the afflicted and the oppressed. In the tradition of the prophets, Jesus dedicated his ministry to

bringing “good news to the poor” and “liberty to the oppressed.” As Christians we are called to follow Jesus by identifying with the victims of injustice, by analyzing the dominant attitudes and structures that cause human suffering and by actively supporting the poor and oppressed in their struggles to transform society.

In subsequent decades the Canadian Catholic bishops have become silent. They were affected by the conservative current fostered by John Paul II in the second part of his period in office and later by Benedict XVI, a vocal opponent of liberation theology. Pope Francis has now endorsed the option for the poor in vigorous fashion: see his exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* of 2013 (#52-67, #176-216). What I want, he writes, is “a Church which is poor and for the poor” (#198). His teaching as yet has not awakened the Canadian Catholic bishops.

Over several years, Stephen Harper’s majority government, elected by a minority of Canadians, has been transforming Canada’s collective identity—from a peace-loving country to a military power; from the respect of democratic participation to the neglect of parliament and the repression of critical voices; from balanced foreign policies in support of reconciliation to one-sided support of “our friends” for reasons of self-interest; from assisting self-directed economic development in the third-world to support for economic enterprises in the South profitable for Canada; from sustaining the welfare state to eliminating social programs and building bigger prisons; from sharing the world’s ecological concern to refusing the adoption of common norms to protect Alberta’s tar-sand industries. What I regret is that the Canadian Catholic bishops, despite the bold teaching of Pope Francis, have as yet chosen to remain silent.

My own work as a theologian and author has been in line with the preferential option for the poor. In Montreal I am part of the Catholic Left, associated with the Jesuit-sponsored Centre *justice et foi* and write for its review *Relations*. I am also a member of Québec Solidaire, a humanist-socialist political party, and support *La ligue des droits et libertés*, *l’Amnistie internationale*, *l’Échec à la guerre* and *Pas de démocratie sans voix*, a movement protesting the actions of the current federal government. At the same time, I see myself as “the useless servant” of Luke 17: 10, relying on God’s mercy.

## PROFILE

### **J. S. WOODSWORTH: CHRISTIAN SOCIALIST AND PEACE-MONGER (Part I)**

by Harold Wells

James Shaver Woodsworth (1874-1942) is the only ordained minister in the United Church tradition who was also a major political figure and a giant of Canadian political history. This one-time Methodist minister, courageous campaigner for the poor, advocate of peace, and founding leader of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.), was a genuine hero of social justice, who bore the cost of a prophetic life. As a prime mover of some of the most cherished aspects of our Canadian society, he deserves to be remembered and celebrated.



#### **Child of the Parsonage**

Woodsworth's mother, Esther Shaver, came of a German-Dutch family that emigrated from Pennsylvania to the Etobicoke area west of Toronto. James was born there in the farm home of his maternal grandparents in 1874. His father, also James, of English colonial stock, was an ordained minister of the Methodist Church. Young James, the eldest of six, grew up in Methodist parsonages, first around Parry Sound and Bracebridge, Ontario, then in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. His father served many years as Superintendent of Methodist missions in the vast North-West. The Woodsworths lived in Brandon, and so James became deeply rooted in western Canada, often travelling with his father by horse or canoe through many parts of the West. He imbibed his parents' zeal, decency and compassion, and, in theology, his father's open-minded, moderate liberalism.

James excelled academically, and also, despite his slender build, distinguished himself in football at Wesley College, Winnipeg. His keen sense of social justice came to the fore during his first experience in pastoral ministry as a probationer/circuit rider in southwestern Manitoba, where he became painfully aware of the economic hardships of the people. In 1898 he studied theology at Victoria University, Toronto, where he was educated in the new “modernist,” historical-critical study of the Bible. He was shocked at the crowded slum conditions and malnutrition in Toronto, admired the work of the Fred Victor Mission, and studied the American Social Gospel theology of Washington Gladden. His theology professor, Chancellor Nathaniel Burwash, a passionate Wesleyan “liberal evangelical,” had long embraced the Darwinian science of evolution and defended critical biblical scholarship. Burwash advised him, before ordination, to spend a year of study in England.

James went to Oxford in 1899, where he lived and worked at a university social service settlement that offered free meals, legal assistance and recreation, while also sponsoring classes on political topics in poor neighbourhoods. James was “sickened” by the poverty he saw. Already in 1899 we hear Woodsworth the nascent peace-monger, indignant about the Boer War: “Why should England be supreme in South Africa?” he asked. Exposure to British and European socialist movements, as well as travel in Britain and Europe, enlarged his insight into the roots of poverty and the need for more than individualistic approaches to social problems. Returning to Toronto and Victoria University, he completed his degree in divinity and, in spite of some doubts about his vocation in pastoral ministry, was ordained at Brandon in 1900.<sup>1</sup>

### **Methodist Ministry and the Social Gospel**

Woodsworth began his pastoral ministry in Assiniboia and at Keewatin. He was, however, almost immediately unhappy in this work, increasingly doubtful about the work of “saving” individuals while ignoring the social roots of most human problems. He now rejected the doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ; yet his devotion to God and to Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J. S. Woodsworth* (University of Toronto Press, 1959), 3-19.



as revelation of God remained firm. He decided in 1902 to resign from the ministry, but the President of the Manitoba and North-West Conference persuaded him that men of his kind of belief were welcome in the Methodist ministry; he then took up a new ministry at Grace Church, Winnipeg. In 1904 he married Lucy Staples, a young woman sympathetic to his thinking, who proved an enthusiastic partner throughout his life. In the face of the growing poverty of working people in Winnipeg, his preaching became increasingly political. At Grace his constant theme was the need to alter the social conditions that lead to poverty; this regularly irritated prosperous, respectable church members. “Jesus,” he argued, “said very little about saving souls—He spoke often about the establishment of the Kingdom.”<sup>2</sup>

Woodsworth, then, was part of that theological movement called the Social Gospel, which began to appear in Britain, Germany, United States and Canada in the 1890s. Historian Richard Allen describes the social gospel as “a movement in search of a theology.”<sup>3</sup> The widely felt need to deal with the abject misery of the working classes gave rise to political reform movements, which drew upon the Christian heritage as a source of inspiration. The German theologian, Albrecht Ritschl, prominent from the 1870s, emphasized the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God as an earthly realm of social justice, and the immanent presence of God in social movements. This theology was combined with Christian socialist thought that was developing richly in Britain, France and Germany.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, social gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch built upon the theology of Ritschl, and spoke of the kingdom of God on earth as “the realm of love and the commonwealth of cooperative labor”<sup>5</sup> (terms borrowed later by the political party led by Woodsworth).

In Canada, Salem Bland (1859-1950)<sup>6</sup> taught theology at Wesley College from 1903 and became a friend and ally of Woodsworth. Bland’s

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<sup>2</sup> Woodsworth, quoted by McNaught, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-1918* (University of Toronto Press, 1971), 4.

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion of Christian socialism in Europe in Harold Wells, *A Future for Socialism? Political Theology and the “Triumph of Capitalism”* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 110-136.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel* ([New York: Macmillan, 1917 and] Nashville: Abingdon Press), 55.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Allen, “Salem Goldworth Bland,” Parts I & 2, *Touchstone* 28, No.1 (Jan. 2010): 44-52;

theology closely resembled that of Ritschl and Rauschenbusch, and explicitly connected Christianity and socialism: “Does Christianity mean Socialism? It means Socialism plus a deeper, diviner brotherhood than even Socialism seeks.”<sup>7</sup> The social gospel was, in part, the child of the European Enlightenment—an optimistic vision of human progress through rationality, education, and gradual moral improvement. It is no accident that in Canada the social gospel was stronger in Methodism than any other denomination, being fed not only by modern optimism and Christian socialist movements, but also by the Wesleyan evangelical heritage of outreach to the poor.<sup>8</sup>

Increasingly critical of the churches as ineffective agencies of the Kingdom, in 1907 Woodsworth resolved again to resign from the ministry, laying out with great honesty the full measure of his doctrinal “heresies.” Still, church authorities refused to accept his resignation and offered him congenial work: Superintendent of All Peoples’ Mission in Winnipeg. Lucy and James and their two children moved into the mission house in a poor area of Winnipeg, and their home became a hospitable extension of the mission. A great many of the clients were abjectly poor, newly arrived immigrants, unable to speak English. The mission offered legal advice, English classes, recreation for children, and fresh air camps. (One of the immigrant families known to him was the Scottish family of Tommy Douglas, who came very early under his influence.) Woodsworth undertook a good deal of public speaking and became an accomplished publicist, writing in local newspapers. He became closely associated with the growing labour movement and was soon recognized as Canada’s foremost expert on the problems of immigrants. During this time he published two substantial books: *Strangers within our Gates* (1909) and *My Neighbour* (1911). Both are replete with facts and figures about the struggles of the poor, especially the foreign-born. *My Neighbour* begins with reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan, a favourite social Gospel text. Drawing upon British socialist thought and the work of American sociologists, Woodsworth declared that “the deplorable truth is that honesty, sobriety, and willingness to work do not suffice to save

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and 28, No. 2 (May 2010): 38-51.

<sup>7</sup> Salem Bland, *The New Christianity* [1920] (University of Toronto Press, 1973), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, *The Social Passion*, 1-8.

thousands of worthy people from the harsh clutches of permanent pauperism.”<sup>9</sup>

Woodsworth felt that the churches often catered to the rich, and that ministers, fearful of losing the support of their congregations, were too often silent on matters of social injustice. Feeling a need to move beyond the limited charitable solutions offered by a city mission, Woodsworth resigned from All People’s in 1913, and became secretary of the Canadian Welfare League, a secular organization which he had laboured to establish. The League engaged in social research, adult education and advocacy, and in this position he became a full-time campaigner for economic justice through writing and public speaking all over the country. In 1916 his employment shifted to the Bureau of Social Research, sponsored by the governments of the three prairie provinces, expanding the agenda of the Bureau into broad concerns about urban and rural poverty.

All of this was happening during the opening years of “the Great War” and Woodsworth soon found himself embattled. Besides annoying powerful people with his socialist ideas, he was loudly outspoken against the war, using the press to rail against what he considered disgusting methods for the recruitment of soldiers, especially emotional appeals to patriotism from the pulpits of the churches. In 1914 he wrote: “To overcome militarism by physical force seems like attempting to cast out Beelzebub by the power of Beelzebub. . . [Jesus], true to his teaching, could save his life only by losing it. Is the disciple above his Lord?”<sup>10</sup> His hatred of war was rooted not only in the teaching of Jesus and compassion for those who suffer and die, but also in his socialist analysis of the causes of war. He shared the socialist conviction that wars in the modern era were an expression of the capitalist exploitation of “the common man,” serving the interests of empires and of capitalist business.<sup>11</sup> Shouting these ideas from the roof tops, Woodsworth came to be regarded as a dangerous man. When he refused to keep quiet about the war, his

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<sup>9</sup> *My Neighbour: A Study of City Conditions; A Plea for Social Service* (Toronto: The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1911), 73. See also *Strangers within our Gates* ([Toronto: Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1909 and] University of Toronto Press, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> J. S. Woodsworth, “Out of the Night the Angels Sing” (1914), in *Hours That Stand Apart* (Ottawa: Mutual Press, 1929), 9.

<sup>11</sup> McNaught, 67.

employment was ended abruptly. “I was bitterly denounced. My closest associates said I was a fool.”<sup>12</sup>

Now Lucy and James, with their growing family—there were now six children!<sup>13</sup>—moved to Gibson’s Landing, B.C., where James took up a Methodist mission appointment. Strongly supporting a local cooperative store, refusing at the same time to allow recruitment of soldiers in the church, he did not last long there. A local merchant and leading Methodist layman used his influence to have him removed; his appointment was not renewed by Conference the following spring. Woodsworth, together with Lucy, now decided that the time had come for resignation from the ministry. In June 1918 his letter of resignation speaks of “how difficult it is to help people through the church,” of “the control of the policies of the church by men of wealth,” but also of his “growing sense of fellowship with the ‘Master’ and the goodly company of those who, throughout the ages, have endeavoured to ‘follow the gleam.’” He reiterates his contention that the “teaching and spirit of Jesus are absolutely irreconcilable with the advocacy of war.” While leaving the ministry he hopes still to have “some share in the work of bringing in the Kingdom.”<sup>14</sup>

It is noteworthy that at this time the leadership of the Methodist Church had moved distinctly to the left in theology and social ethics. In 1918, the year that Woodsworth left the ministry, the General Conference of the Methodist Church, meeting in Hamilton, had formulated positions very close to Woodsworth’s own. The General Superintendent, Samuel Chown, opened the conference with a denunciation of “plutocracy” and the controlling power of money. The Conference Committee on Social Service and Evangelism located the roots of war in the capitalist system. A resolution, written by Salem Bland and approved by the majority, called for nothing less than a “complete reconstruction” of social and economic relations in Canadian society. Building upon the “ethics of Jesus,” it demanded “a transference of the whole economic life from a basis of competition and profits to one of co-operation and service.” It went on to urge concrete measures, such as co-partnership of labour in management

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<sup>12</sup> McNaught, 77.

<sup>13</sup> See a family perspective on Woodsworth’s life by his daughter, Grace MacInnis, *J. S. Woodsworth: A Man to Remember* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1953).

<sup>14</sup> Cited by McNaught, 83-85.

and profit, and nationalization of natural resource industries, means of communication, transportation and public utilities, as well as the establishment of old age pensions. It recommended a mixed economy, with close controls on the private sector.<sup>15</sup> This, however, was not the Methodist Church as Woodsworth had experienced it on the ground in Winnipeg or Gibson's Landing.

### **Paying the Price**

Having left the security of the ministry and finding himself unemployed with six children to support, Woodsworth left his family behind in Gibson's Landing and took himself to the docks of Vancouver. After waiting for days in the rain, he was finally admitted to hard labour, loading and unloading ships. He described himself as a "longshoreman, in gray flannel shirt, overalls and slicker," exhilarated in being one of "the glorious army of workers." He declares that "though muscles often ache and the back is tired, there is more than compensation in being as yet no man's slave . . . Come on in—the water's fine!"<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, back in Gibson's Landing, Lucy, alone and responsible for her large family, eventually supplemented their income by teaching in the village school. Her full-hearted partnership with her husband is evident in a letter of 1919: "With James I have entirely ceased to wish for luxury, ease, comfort, or advantage for us, yes, or for our children, while countless thousands never do and never will, under the present system, get a chance for ordinary decent living." She realized that those who worked with James on the docks would "never get enough money for dentistry, surgery, high school or university education, music, travel . . ."<sup>17</sup>

Work became slack in Vancouver, and Woodsworth accepted an invitation in the spring of 1919 from the Rev. William Ivens of Winnipeg (also a Methodist social gospel minister who had lost his position) to undertake a speaking and organizing tour for a labour organization. Woodsworth was particularly interested in encouraging urban labourers and farmers to cooperate in the interests of all working people. Deeply engaged within a highly diverse working class movement, he clarified his

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<sup>15</sup> Allen, *The Social Passion*, 71-76.

<sup>16</sup> *Western Labour News*, Feb. 1919, cited by McNaught, 93-94.

<sup>17</sup> Cited by McNaught, 131.

own political thought, moving toward a clear policy of democratic socialism. In these years, following so closely upon the Russian Revolution, he insisted that no society could be reconstructed in “one fell swoop.” He eschewed Marxist talk of class struggle, or a “materialist interpretation of history,” and strongly opposed any violent “direct action.” Following the “revisionist” approach of the British Labour Party he sought a peaceful, democratic movement, and stood against every kind of dogmatism, whether religious or political. Aligning with a new Federated Labour Party, Woodsworth supported “the underlying principle stressed by Marx, viz., the collective ownership and democratic control of the means of wealth production.”<sup>18</sup>

At this time he became a strong supporter also of the “Labour Church,” a loosely organized working-class church, notably eight congregations in Winnipeg, but also present in other western cities. An “independent creedless church based on the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man,” it provided worship and pastoral care for those who had been alienated by the social conservatism of the established churches. It was organized by William Ivens,<sup>19</sup> and supported by Salem Bland (who had been dismissed from his teaching post at Wesley College).<sup>20</sup> Woodsworth often preached and lectured in the Labour churches.

The working class struggle came to a head in the Winnipeg General Sympathetic Strike, lasting from May 15 to June 26, 1919. Sympathetic strikes occurred simultaneously in other western cities, and even some eastern cities. In Winnipeg some 30,000 workers withdrew their labour in sympathy with metal workers, who demanded the right to bargain collectively through agents of their choice. According to historian Richard Allen, no revolutionary political goals were in sight; the workers simply demanded the right of unions to organize and to bargain freely. The forces of business and government became alarmed, believing that a Bolshevik revolution was underway. Though the strikers were orderly and peaceful, heavy-handed tactics were used to oppose the strike, including threats of dismissal and deportation. Woodsworth arrived in Winnipeg on June 8

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<sup>18</sup>Cited from the *Western Labour News* by McNaught, 96.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Smillie, *Beyond the Social Gospel: Church Protest on the Prairies* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1991), 44-45.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Allen, *The Social Passion*, 81-82, 117-118, 149-150.

and quickly became part of the strike leadership group. Ten leaders were arrested on June 17, including William Ivens, editor of the *Western Labour News*, and charged with seditious libel. Woodsworth took his place as editor. Woodsworth's edition told the story of "Bloody Saturday," June 21, when Prime Minister Borden had sent in the Royal North-West Mounted Police. On the occasion of a peaceful parade of returned soldiers, accompanied by their wives, the police ". . . with revolvers drawn, galloped down Main Street, and charged into the crowd on William Avenue, firing as they charged. One man . . . dropped with a bullet through his breast. Another standing by was shot through the head." Soon afterward Woodsworth was arrested by a federal agent, charged with seditious libel, and "disappeared through the fortress iron gates of Rupert Street jail." He wrote to his wife from prison: "To be in jail is no longer the most terrible thing . . . But one is committed as never before to the cause of the poor and the helpless, particularly the foreigner. This is only the first round . . ." <sup>21</sup>

*Part II will appear in the October number and discuss Woodsworth's long career as a Member of Parliament and leader of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation.*

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<sup>21</sup> McNaught, 129. See account of the General Strike by McNaught, chapter 8 and by Allen, chapter 5.

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### TWO RECENT HISTORIES OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

by Don Schweitzer

Phyllis Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. Pp. xx + 440.

Kevin Flatt, *After Evangelicalism: The Sixties and the United Church of Canada*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. Pp. xii + 349.

These two books study the history of The United Church of Canada but in very different ways. Phyllis Airhart, professor of the history of Christianity at Emmanuel College, Toronto, seeks to understand the United Church in terms of its own stated denominational intentions and self-understanding. Her long-awaited book, the result of decades of research and teaching, is a magnificent contribution to the study of the United Church's history. Kevin Flatt, assistant professor of history at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, recounts and evaluates the history of the United Church according to criteria foreign to many in it, essentially restating a criticism of the United Church made by conservative evangelical critics since its beginning. The result is an interesting and, at times, thought-provoking read, but one that fails to make its argument convincingly.

Flatt argues that the United Church's public identity and beliefs were fundamentally changed in the course of its history. According to Flatt, "nineteenth-century Methodist and Presbyterian forebears of the United Church were evangelical"<sup>1</sup> in their theology and church practices, but, by the late twentieth century, the United Church was not. Flatt explains this change by way of conspiracy theory. Up until the 1960s, United Church leaders promoted evangelical practices while personally rejecting evangelical beliefs. During the 1960s its leaders systematically

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Flatt, *After Evangelicalism: The Sixties and the United Church of Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 5.



dismantled the United Church's "public evangelical identity," replacing it with "a new liberal one."<sup>2</sup> Central to this makeover of the United Church's theology and public identity was the development and promotion of its New Curriculum.

Flatt's argument depends on several dichotomies. One is between his definition of evangelicalism, adopted from C. S. Lewis, and "modernism," the revision of traditional Christian teaching to accommodate modern secular thought.<sup>3</sup> Another is his view that the United Church began as a two-tiered body, run by leaders who held modernist views of Christianity but who recognized the utility of evangelical practices such as revivals and Sunday Schools for attaining their goal of transforming Canadian society, and so promoted these. Beneath the modernism of the United Church's leadership and of its theological colleges was a church that was essentially evangelical in its practices and beliefs. Flatt argues that this pattern held from the 1930s to the 1960s. While the United Church maintained an evangelical public presence, it grew. The "quiet modernism" of United Church leaders began to become more explicit during the 1950s as planning began for the New Curriculum, which attempted to impose a modernist outlook on the whole church. This was a turning point for evangelicalism in the United Church.<sup>4</sup> As the New Curriculum rolled off the press in the 1960s, United Church leaders publicly repudiated fundamentalist critics of it, ceased to be quiet in their modernism, and re-defined the United Church's public identity as non-evangelical. This aggravated the decline in its membership that began at this time.

Flatt is undoubtedly correct that the 1960s were a turning point for the United Church. Largely as a result of changes in Canadian society, its membership ceased to grow, and began a continuing decline. The divide between theologically liberal and conservative members became more evident and fractious than before, and the United Church ceased to endorse the kind of revival campaigns that it had repeatedly promoted since its formation. In the latter half of the sixties, it entered into a several decades-long process of dramatically revising many of its teachings in the

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<sup>2</sup> Flatt, 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9, 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

areas of gender roles, sexuality and mission goals, further separating it from what Flatt describes as evangelicalism.

However, it is doubtful that the United Church was ever “evangelical” in Flatt’s sense of the term. The majority of Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Methodists who entered union described themselves as evangelical, and were so in the sense of believing that they had good news about Jesus Christ that the world needed to hear. But the dichotomies 1) between the authority of Scripture and knowledge gained through the natural sciences and 2) between understanding Jesus as a source of personal salvation and understanding Jesus as calling one to seek the welfare of surrounding society, which Flatt argues are key to evangelicalism, were foreign to the evangelicalism of most who entered union,<sup>5</sup> and to their Methodist and Reformed theological heritages. Furthermore, the openness to forms of knowledge and experience other than Scripture and religious experience, the use of biblical criticism and the repudiation of fundamentalism that Flatt describes as “modernism” was never quiet in the United Church. All this can be found in articles, editorials and reviews in *The New Outlook* from its inception.

Flatt repeatedly downplays evidence indicating that his dichotomy between evangelicalism and what he calls modernism does not fit the history he studies. This is most obvious in his treatment of J.R. Mutchmor, who supported both Billy Graham’s evangelistic campaigns and the New Curriculum. For Flatt, liberalism in the United Church is always “of the church’s theological elite and other leaders.”<sup>6</sup> He shows little recognition that many lay people shared these beliefs or that some of the impetus for things like the New Creed often came from lay people. The United Church has ceased to support evangelical revival campaigns, but the Emerging Spirit program of recent years was an attempt to do evangelism in a different way. Nor did the United Church simply accommodate itself to modern secular society in the 1960s and 70s. After the United Church relaxed its traditional opposition to alcohol

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<sup>5</sup> The term evangelical as used by those who entered union “signified simply ‘Protestant,’ in the sense of rooted in the Gospel as reclaimed by the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.” Thomas McIntyre, “Unity among Many: The Formation of The United Church of Canada, 1899-1930,” in *The United Church of Canada: A History*, ed. Don Schweitzer (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 22.

<sup>6</sup> Flatt, 152.

consumption and preservation of Sunday as the Lord's Day, it and other formerly dominant denominations, assumed a more prophetic role in relation to Canadian society, criticizing its injustices at home and abroad, and repenting of their own participation in these. Flatt overlooks this.

In a penultimate chapter, Flatt shifts from church history to sociology of religion in an attempt to link the United Church's loss of members to what he sees as its departure from evangelicalism. This argument also fails to be convincing. As Reginald Bibby has pointed out, the primary reasons for the loss of membership in denominations like the United Church are demographic, not doctrinal.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to know how one appears in another's eyes, and so this study of the United Church's history by a conservative evangelical is an interesting read. Flatt ably lifts up the hubris and some inconsistencies of prominent liberal United Church members towards conservative evangelicals in the 1960s–1980s. He correctly notes the importance of ventures like the New Curriculum for the United Church as a denomination. He identifies important debates in the 1960s, such as that over support for Billy Graham's evangelical campaigns, debates that both indicated and furthered changes occurring in the mind of the United Church as a whole. Unfortunately the combination of his definition of evangelicalism and his dichotomy between the beliefs of the United Church's leadership and its lay people functions as a Procrustean bed into which he tries to force the United Church's history to fit. Flatt fails to respect different understandings of the gospel that have been driving forces in the United Church's history that do not fit the confines of his definitions.

Phyllis Airhart begins her book by noting that the movement to form the United Church drew inspiration from a number of sources. Chief among these was the "liberal evangelical theology"<sup>8</sup> shared by many leaders and lay people in the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregationalist Churches in Canada. This theology or spirituality was "evangelical" in that it believed it had good news in the gospel of Jesus Christ that it was called to share with others and live out in the world. It

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<sup>7</sup> Reginald Bibby, "Letter," *The United Church Observer*, New Series 77/5 (December 2013), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), xix.

was ‘liberal’ in that it was open to the critical use of reason, both to understand the faith and its sources, and to understand society and to develop strategies to engage it. It was also liberal in its belief that under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, through dialogue, study and discussion, like-minded Christians could move beyond the doctrinal divisions that separated them, develop a shared understanding of their faith<sup>9</sup> and enter into organic union that would better serve the cause of Christ. This liberal evangelical outlook believed that “Christianity was both personal and social in character.”<sup>10</sup> It typically involved a personal commitment to Christ that had to be expressed in service to one’s community. Those who formed the United Church believed that Christ called them to seek the welfare of the communities of which they were a part. They sought to offer “friendly service” to all of Canada and the world beyond.

Airhart traces how direction from this faith was given by: a Victorian ideal of Christian unity and the notion of a national church; the thinking and ideological influence of George Munro Grant;<sup>11</sup> a Protestant evangelical consensus and networks of cooperation that spanned denominations; and the openness of English-speaking Canada to the formative influence of Protestant churches and the practical needs of church life in Western Canada. All this made the formation of a church uniting Protestantism in Canada seem possible and necessary. The idea of Protestant denominations here uniting to form “a national church” was born from these diverse influences, and galvanized the church union movement, leading, over the course of roughly two decades, to the formation of The United Church of Canada.

Airhart’s book is in many respects a history of how this liberal evangelical theology and its vision of seeking to be Canada’s national church energized and guided the United Church for over four decades, up until the late 1960s, when the Canadian federal government, urged on by some leaders in the Anglican, United, and other Protestant churches, adopted a policy of multi-culturalism. This and a rapid increase in the secularization of Canadian society ended the voluntary establishment of traditionally dominant Protestant churches in English-speaking Canada,

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<sup>9</sup> Airhart, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15-17.

and the “nation-building partnership” that had been central to the United Church’s founding vision. When this ended, so did the viability of the founding vision of the United Church.<sup>12</sup>

Airhart notes how the United Church, though a uniquely Canadian institution, has reflected trans-Atlantic movements and influences. Its dual agenda of evangelism and social service that was set in place early in its life and maintained up until the 1960s reflected an ecumenical consensus regarding Christian missions that was international in scope. The social gospel also had a lasting influence on the United Church; yet the United Church’s guiding vision and spirituality could never be reduced to this. Its liberal evangelicalism was receptive to the social gospel and led to participation in many of its causes. But the United Church also repeatedly implemented evangelical campaigns aimed at personal conversions as part of its self-proclaimed dual mandate of evangelism and social service.

Airhart also notes that there was a “conserving impulse” behind the formation of the United Church. Prior to union, Protestant churches had considerable influence in the moral fabric of English-speaking Canada. Union was partly an attempt to preserve and consolidate this.<sup>13</sup> Airhart charts how this influence was repeatedly challenged in the course of the United Church’s history. The repeal of Prohibition was an early major defeat for the United Church. While the Depression vindicated its role as a nation-wide institution and may have strengthened its position in English-speaking communities, World War II and social changes resulting from it led to questions about its role as a source of unity in Canadian society. After World War II its missionaries were no longer welcome in mission fields in China and Korea. As the church experienced unprecedented growth in the 1950s, its leaders began to notice a growing divide between its teaching on matters like alcohol consumption and the practices of many of its members. Out of its mandate for social service, the United Church repeatedly called for federal and provincial government initiatives in the areas of education, health care, and other social services in which it was involved. With the rise of welfare capitalism, the United Church found its work in these areas being

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<sup>12</sup> Airhart, 222-3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

superseded by that of the state. Out of humanitarian concern it repeatedly called for increased openness to immigration. As the state responded, many immigrants turned out to be Roman Catholic or non-Christian. As a result, while the United Church grew rapidly in the 1950s, its growth failed to keep pace with that of Canada's population, and its influence in English-speaking Canada, though still considerable, began to wane.

Airhart observes that the United Church “exuded a sense of its own self-importance”<sup>14</sup> during the 1950s. Yet the publication of the Massey Report in 1951 called for the federal government to fund a wide range of cultural activities. This led to government initiatives in culture that soon challenged the community and culture forming power of churches in Canadian society. In the 1960s the cultural influence, practices, and teachings of Protestant churches in English-speaking Canada was repeatedly and publicly criticized, sometimes at their own instigation. Airhart notes that a new generation of national church leaders in the 1960s, represented by Ray Hord, called for the church to assume a new relationship to Canadian society. Instead of issuing general directives about social issues that avoided alignment with any political party—as the United Church had typically done in previous years—Hord, Ben Smillie and others called for the United Church to identify itself explicitly with specific social causes and movements. In preceding decades, the offer of “friendly service to the nation” had assumed that the church knew what the world needed and had it to offer. Hord and others now called for the United Church to listen to the world. As part of this changed approach, Anglican Church leaders commissioned Pierre Berton to write *The Comfortable Pew*. The United Church responded with its own self-critical *Why the Sea is Boiling Hot*.<sup>15</sup>

Airhart argues that, with this call to listen to the world, Hord and others “primed” the United Church for the difficult days that lay ahead, in which the United Church would face unprecedented challenges as its established place in English-speaking Canada disappeared. Airhart also defends the New Curriculum. While it didn't last long, partly because it assumed attendance patterns at Sunday School that were abating even as

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<sup>14</sup> Airhart, 203.

<sup>15</sup> The Evangelism Resource Committee, *Why the Sea is Boiling Hot: A Symposium on the Church and the World* (Toronto: Board of Evangelism and Social Service, 1965).

its new hard-cover books were rolling off the press in the 1960s, its critics “failed to appreciate how deeply biblical and theological it was in both aim and actual content.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, she defends the United Church’s quest to become a national church. With the dis-establishment of Protestant denominations like the United and Anglican churches in English-speaking Canada, an era of Canadian history came to an end. Airhart argues that as Canadian society came to be marked by religious pluralism, social fragmentation, and secularism, religious groups with a more sectarian relationship to surrounding society were better suited to this new cultural setting than those like the United Church, which has yet to adjust fully to this sea change. Yet she avers that, though “Canada’s democratic ideals and social welfare policies have since become separated from their Christian roots, the United Church did help to lay the groundwork for them.”<sup>17</sup> Although the United Church’s quest to become Canada’s national church is no longer viable, and its legacy, including its participation in Indian residential schools, is ambiguous, it did help shape English-speaking Canada in ways that reflect the Bible’s emphasis on human dignity and its ethical teaching that we belong to one another; that we are the other’s keeper.

Though the United Church now finds itself in a very different cultural setting, certain aspects of its founding vision remain valid. Airhart notes that underlying the United Church’s organizational structure from its beginning was the principle that some “tasks could be undertaken by local congregations, but others needed the support of the wider church.”<sup>18</sup> This principle remains valid and is a continuing feature of the United Church’s life. Central to the ethos of the United Church from its beginning was a commitment to assisting those in need and working in partnership with other groups in doing this.<sup>19</sup> Finally, central to its liberal evangelicalism was a belief that transformed individuals are the key to transforming society. Social change is no longer seen to follow directly upon moral uplift. Cultural and political struggles are also necessary to

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<sup>16</sup> Airhart, 171.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 73. Also true is the converse of this, namely, the Roman Catholic principle of subsidiarity, that actions and decisions that can be undertaken at the local level should not be taken over by higher courts of the church.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

overcome structural evils. Yet there continues to be a need in secular societies for religious communities that impart ideals of compassion and visions of a greater social justice to individuals and to society as a whole. Without this, secular reason is in danger of becoming cynical and restricted in its moral concern.<sup>20</sup> An evangelical impulse to share its vision of the good news of Jesus Christ still remains in the United Church, and is still needed. What is lacking is an effective strategy for how to do this.

This is an excellently researched, well-written history of the first fifty years of the United Church's life. It concludes in the mid-seventies and so does not deal with the most recent forty years of the Church's life. Also, in discussing the motives for union, Airhart does not mention an important theological influence: John 17:21. A new understanding of this verse as expressing God's will that the wounds in the body of Christ represented by denominational divisions be healed through organic union was a powerful motivation for the formation of the United Church. Those who criticized the United Church as being "creedless"<sup>21</sup> disputed this interpretation. Unionists like S. D. Chown defended it,<sup>22</sup> and argued that the church's coming to this new understanding of the gospel, and pursuing it through innovative action like union, was an expression of Christian liberty.<sup>23</sup>

Through her study of the United Church's history, what moved it, where it failed, and where it succeeded, Airhart offers an important understanding of its place in church and Canadian history, and insights for its continuing life. Flatt shows how the United Church's history appears from one conservative evangelical perspective. Students of Canadian Church history, members of the United Church, and others can profit from reading both.

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<sup>20</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing," in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 15- 23.

<sup>21</sup> Airhart, 32.

<sup>22</sup> S. D. Chown, *The Story of Church Union in Canada* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1930), 2-8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.