

The United Church of Canada in British Columbia

By Bob Stewart

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On June 10, 1925 the United Church of Canada was born. That day it became the largest Protestant Christian church in Canada. This union of the Congregationalists, Methodists and two-thirds of the Presbyterians of Canada was believed by the new church to be an appropriate response to the challenges of the Canadian social, historical and geographical environment. As well as being seen as the will of God, church union was seen as an answer to the difficulties of building a church in a huge country with a small population. It was seen as a better vehicle for carrying out the mission of the church, and providing a strong and unified voice for social reform. It was seen as the religious equivalent to Canadian Confederation.

The argument of this brief look at the history of the United Church of Canada in British Columbia is that British Columbia provided more historical and geographical challenges and difficulties for the establishment of organized denominational religion than any other region in Canada. The rugged and mountainous geography of the province has made settlement exceptionally difficult. Further, we have a short history: except for the Native Indian people, we are an immigrant people who came to British Columbia in significant numbers only with our first gold rush less than 150 years ago, in 1858. The early gold seekers set a pattern that later waves of immigrants followed: we came seeking our fortunes in the resource industries that are the source of our wealth, rather than as families of settlers. All of these geographical and historical dimensions have made British Columbians highly transient people, without some of the prerequisites for establishing deep religious roots. In short, British Columbia is the most secular of all Canadian provinces.

This spirit of secularity is experienced within the United Church. For example, while B.C. is a relatively wealthy province within Canada, the United Church here receives much more mission aid money from our church in other parts of Canada than does any other region. Of about 275 congregations of the United Church in B.C., nearly one-third are not fully self-supporting. Thus we can see that B.C. is even today very much a mission frontier of the United Church of Canada. We live in a province whose roots in the Christian church are relatively weak: most people living here have no real relationship to any institutional religious group.

What a strange thing the United Church is! What can one say when nearly 550,000 people in B.C. claim us, and we do not claim them? In the 1981 census, 550,000 (over 20% of the B.C. population) identified themselves with the United Church, but the United Church in B.C. Conference claimed a membership of about 55,000, or about 2% of the B.C. population.

The United Church in B.C. is characteristically liberal in its theology, although some of our membership are more conservative, evangelical and charismatic. At times, tensions arise over various theological, social and political issues of our day. Clergy coming from other parts of Canada often find that the laypeople of the church in B.C. are

less willing to defer to the ordained than they are elsewhere. This, again, reflects the secular climate of the province: the churches and the clergy generally have little clout – with the government, with the press, and sometimes with the church membership itself.

This general description of the United Church in B.C. may seem a little harsh. I would not wish to suggest that our history is devoid of moments of glory, or leaders of courage and vision. But this account of our church does not emphasize these high spots; instead, it intends to examine some of the peculiarities of the United Church in B.C., and to seek some explanations for what we are at present in the stories that make up our past. In doing so we will survey each of the three denominations that joined to form the United Church of Canada in 1925, and try to see what happened to our experiment in the melding of traditions into a United Church. To understand why the denominations joined together, we must go back to their individual roots. The story begins with the missionaries of the denominations from which we emerged.

THE CONGREGATIONALISTS

The first Protestant missionary to set foot in what became British Columbia was an American Congregationalist, the Rev. Jonathan Smith Green. His brief, and woe-begotten visit in 1829 bore no lasting result but was perhaps a parable of the difficulties facing later missionaries. Green, ordained in 1827, was sent the following year from New England to Hawaii to serve as a missionary. On Friday, the 13th of February, 1829, Green sailed from Hawaii to extend the mission to the northwest Pacific coast. While he was filled with the great missionary spirit of his age, Green had also been described as being “tactful as a porcupine.” Visiting the Queen Charlotte Islands, Alaska, and the northern coast of B.C., Green was impressed with the intelligence of the Indian people he met, but he found them quite unfriendly, due to their earlier experience with white fur traders. At Kiganee village in Alaska, his ship was attacked; shots were fired, wounding some of the crew and killing some of the Indians. Green was so distressed by this experience that on his return to Hawaii, he recommended that no mission work begin on the northwest coast of North America. It was thirty years before a new Congregationalist initiative was undertaken.

In 1859, two Congregationalist ministers arrived in Victoria to attempt to establish a Congregational church in that city. Their experience suggests some of the difficulties a Congregational style of church life seems to have, even today. Arriving in August of 1859, William F. Clarke, previously of London, Canada West (Ontario), and Wisconsin, found that the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches were well established, and that the Methodists had arrived six months earlier. Clarke was joined a month later by a second Congregationalist minister, Matthew Macfie. This should have strengthened the Congregational initiative; rather it provided an occasion for quarrelling.

While Clarke was successful in preventing Governor Douglas from providing a trust fund to Edward Cridge, Rector of the Anglican Church, with its implication of a “state church,” he was less successful in his fight with his colleague, Matthew Macfie. Macfie, from England, insisted on having a segregated “negro corner” in the church, while Clarke was against any segregation. Thus the small town of Victoria found it had two Congregational churches. Clarke’s attempt to create an integrated congregation was rejected by most of the white members of his church and they joined Macfie’s church. The black members, who had left the U.S. to escape prejudice, had no desire to have a church of their own. Consequently, many of them also left Carke’s congregation, to join the Anglican church, where the Rev. Edward Cridge rented pews to black and white

alike. Eastern Congregational authorities assured Clarke that he was in the right, but with his congregation deeply in debt, Clarke resigned and returned to the east in March of 1860. Macfie continued in Victoria until 1864, where he remained a popular preacher and lecturer. On his departure, his congregation withered, most members joining the recently established Presbyterian Church in Victoria.

About thirty years later, in 1895, the Rev. James Bushell, of Port Angeles, Washington, founded First Congregational Church in Victoria. The congregation continued until 1925, when it entered the United Church of Canada.

In Vancouver, the Congregational Church began in 1888, under the ministry of the Rev. J.W. Pedley. First Congregational Church, Vancouver, had a series of forceful ministers, including J.H. Bainton, J.K. Unsworth, and A.E. Cooke, all of whom were very active in public life. J.H. Bainton (the father of the renowned church historian, Roland Bainton) was there at the time of the Boer War. As an avowed pacifist, he alienated many members of his congregation, who saw his stance as treasonous. In typical Congregational fashion, this group formed a new congregation from 1901 until 1904 when Bainton moved on.

THE METHODISTS

In 1857, gold was discovered in the North Thompson river; by 1858 the gold rush was on, and with the rush came the Methodist missionaries. As thousands of young single men came to seek their fortunes, twelve men from Canada offered to serve in the first Wesleyan Methodist thrust into the new colony. Four were chosen: Ephraim Evans, Edward White, Arthur Browning and Ebenezer Robson. After a six week journey from Toronto via Panama by train and ship, the missionary party landed in Victoria on February 10, 1859, where they were greeted by Edward Cridge, the Anglican Rector. By August, the cornerstone for a Methodist Church had been laid in Victoria, with the Congregational minister, Mr. Clarke, participating in this ceremony.

Preceding the official "landing party," as early as 1857, a young Methodist school teacher, Cornelius Bryant, had held the first Methodist religious meeting in the coal mining camp of Nanaimo. He later became an ordained minister. As well, four Methodists from Washington had held a few services in the Fraser valley and Victoria, but they had returned to the U.S. on hearing that Canadian Methodists were being sent in.

Within weeks of their arrival the Methodist "landing party" moved to their stations in the two colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia. These stations were Victoria (Evans), Nanaimo (Browning), New Westminster (White), and Hope and Yale (Robson). By 1862, the gold rush had shifted to the Cariboo. More "troops" were required to minister to the transient miners.

Perhaps best known of the new recruits was Thomas Crosby, of Woodstock, Ontario. Crosby, unable to get a church appointment, borrowed the money needed to make the trip to the west coast. He taught at the Indian school in Nanaimo after his arrival in 1862. Learning the Indian language, Crosby became a local preacher and soon became an outstanding figure in Indian mission work in B.C. In 1871, Crosby became the first person ordained by the Methodist Church in B.C. While Crosby had little education, his simple sermons and his strong voice had great appeal. In 1874, he went to Fort Simpson, a Hudson's Bay Company trading post, on the invitation of a group of Indian people there. He remained in the Simpson district until 1897, carrying on his missionary work by dugout canoe until 1884, when the *Glad Tidings*, a steam ship of

about 25 metres went into service. In the *Glad Tidings*, Crosby was able to travel the whole coast of the province. From 1907 until his death in 1914, Crosby served the east coast of Vancouver Island, the mission field where his work had begun.

While the first Methodists had come to B.C. to evangelize the gold miners, missionaries like Crosby, and his fellow workers, such as J.E. Gardiner, C.M. Tate, William Pollard and Captain William Oliver soon found themselves involved in work with the Indian and Chinese people. Indian mission work, consisting of schools and medical services as well as evangelistic activity, expanded greatly over the years. By 1871, the four pioneer Methodists had returned to Ontario, but the new generation of missionaries had spread through the interior to the Cariboo, and up the coast. In 1886, the Canadian Pacific Railway reached the Pacific coast, and the following year, the British Columbia Conference of the Methodist Church was organized as the governing body of Methodism on the west coast. By this time, there were four self-supporting congregations, and 25 missions, (including nine Indian and one Chinese), with a total of 1,975 members.

What of Vancouver? In the 1860's, Ebenezer Robson made occasional visits to Burrard Inlet, and in 1873, Amos Russ preached every second week at Hastings Mill on Burrard Inlet. Then in 1874, James Turner was put in charge of the mission work at Burrard Inlet. He built a small parsonage at Granville that year. Thomas Derrick followed him, building a small church on the waterfront in 1876. This church was largely attended by Indian people, but because of the wild behaviour of the white citizens, the Granville church declined. Derrick was succeeded by Cornelius Bryant, Christopher Thompson and Joseph Hall. Hall was the minister when Vancouver was founded in 1886. He built a hall on Water Street, near Abbott Street, but had to rebuild it when it was destroyed in the great fire that burned the city down only weeks after it was founded. In 1887, Hall was replaced by Ebenezer Robson, who had returned from Ontario.

With the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the city was growing very quickly and the Methodists decided to move off the waterfront. They purchased two lots, one in the west end, at Homer and Dunsmuir Streets, and one in the east end, on Princess Street. The Homer Street Methodist Church was dedicated in 1889; the east end Methodist church was initiated by Ebenezer Robson in 1888, the congregation worshipping in the Police Courts of the City Hall. The Princess Street Church opened under John Betts the following year. At the turn of the century the Homer Street property was sold and a larger lot on the southwest corner of Georgia and Burrard was bought. This new church, Wesley Methodist, was opened in 1901. By the turn of the century, the Methodists had six churches in the Vancouver area; by 1914, they had 26.

In 1897 Columbian Methodist College was established in New Westminster; this college offered courses in Arts and Theology and was the pioneer institution of higher education in B.C. In 1923, Ryerson College was opened as a theological seminary. It was accommodated at Westminster Hall, the Presbyterian seminary in Vancouver, and all classes were co-operatively shared by both denominations.

Another major contribution of the Methodist Church in B.C. was to medical services. Medical mission work began in 1889 at Port Simpson under Dr. A.E. Boulton; by 1925 there were three Methodist Hospitals in the province, at Hazelton, Bella Bella and Port Simpson.

At the turn of the century, the Methodist Church in B.C. had 52 ministers, 12 probationers (qualifying for ordination), 92 congregations, and 5,496 members, including 1,546 Indians, 172 Japanese and 82 Chinese. By the time of the founding of the United

Church in 1925, the Methodist Church had 109 ministers, 14 probationers, and 17,823 members.

The Methodist Church of Canada was highly organized. Local congregations were organized into Districts (11 in B.C.), Districts into regional Annual Conferences (12 in Canada, and Annual Conferences into a national General Conference. Accordingly, the Methodist Church in British Columbia was characterized by a well coordinated but flexible missionary organization which had considerable evangelical zeal. This combination of centralized organization with a large network of local itinerant preachers who were filled with evangelical passion was very effective in initiating a mission to a transient and isolated Pacific coast society. But as people became more settled, both the centralized authority and the evangelical zeal were increasingly felt to be overdone. Some of the Methodist missionaries came to the B.C. frontier because their brand of evangelical passion had already begun to wear thin on the cultured audiences of Ontario. This Methodist evangelical passion is also part of the ambiguous inheritance of the United Church today. The shift of emphasis from personal to social salvation that was inherent in the social gospel movement which provided much of the theological basis for our church union, was perhaps less deeply felt, or at least was later arriving in British Columbia than in some other regions of Canada. But in a province with as secular acclimate as ours, the evangelical passion never really took root in the larger society, but only truly rooted itself in a fairly small remnant of the church membership. Our "Bible Belt," while never wide or long, has continued to be vocal, if not highly numerous.

On inheriting the Methodist centralized and authoritarian system of settling ministers, the United Church has had great difficulty in integrating that system with the Presbyterian system of "calling" ministers. This "settlement and call" problem has been one of the continually provoking problems of our institutional life, right up to the present day.

THE PRESBYTERIANS

The earliest Presbyterians to come to British Columbia were Scottish explorers and fur traders; they were followed later by coal miners and gold seekers in the gold rush of the 1850's. While many Scottish and Irish Presbyterian settlers appealed for Presbyterian clergy for the colonies, none was forthcoming. Finally, John Hall, a missionary from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, came to Victoria in 1861, where he founded and built First Presbyterian Church between 1861 and 1863. It is notable that Ephraim Evans of the Methodist Church preached in the evening of the dedication of First Presbyterian Church in November, 1863. The preacher at the dedication in the morning was the Rev. James Nimmo, who had just arrived in Victoria "to plant a congregation of the Scottish Church." Nimmo's arrival had been a surprise to Hall, and the prospect of having a second Presbyterian church in Victoria did not please those who had founded First Presbyterian Church. Nimmo continued to try to form a Scottish Presbyterian congregation in the face of considerable opposition. Hall decided that the solution to the problem was the calling of a new Scottish Presbyterian minister to First Presbyterian Church, so he resigned in 1865 and went to New Zealand. Nimmo was not acceptable as a replacement as he had been disrupting the congregation, so the Rev. Thomas Somerville of Glasgow was sent in.

Thomas Somerville was able to increase the membership of First Presbyterian fourfold in his first year there, but all was not well. He found the congregation to be very diverse in their views; the Congregationalists from Macfie's disbanded church had joined

First Presbyterian had joined First Presbyterian. As well, the congregation was run by a general committee, elected annually, but this committee had no formal terms of reference. There were no elders at the time he arrived and there was no Presbytery. Many of the founding members of First Presbyterian liked the independence of the congregation and resented Somerville's attempts to make the organization of the congregation more rigorous. In 1866 a schism developed over the legality of the trustees of the property being personally responsible for the mortgage debt; Somerville withdrew and formed St. Andrew's Presbyterian church. Many of the Scottish Presbyterian members joined with him and it was nine years before First Presbyterian was able to rally its forces and call a new minister.

In 1862, Robert Jamieson was sent by the Canada Presbyterian Church to New Westminster. There he founded St. Andrew's Presbyterian, and did mission work in the Fraser Valley. While Jamieson found conditions reasonable when he arrived in New Westminster 1863, he was appalled by the poverty of religious and social life on a visit to Victoria:

...the church goes there are sadly in the minority – all the congregations there are exceedingly small... Hundreds on the Sabbath are parading the streets, or standing on corners discussing "claims" and "prospectings," and "shares" and "fields." Many are spending the day drinking and gambling and frequenting the tobacco stores, which are numerous and all open... Drinking and gambling and cohabiting with the natives are the ruin and hundreds of successful miners.... Many turn out to be infidels or Universalists when they are out in these mining countries for a time – many, too, are quite indifferent to the interests of the church to which they even profess to belong....

In 1875, the Presbytery of British Columbia of the Church of Scotland was formed, after which an increasing number of Presbyterian missionaries were sent around the province, people such as George Murray to the interior, and Alexander Dunn to the Lower Fraser valley.

With the arrival of the railway in the mid-1880's, Presbyterianism grew very quickly. The Rev. Thomas Gavin Thompson came from Ontario to the new field of Richmond and Burrard Inlet in 1885. Within the year Vancouver was founded, and Thompson was had built three churches, one on Sea Island in Richmond, and two in Vancouver, the second being a replacement for the first which had been destroyed a month after its completion in the great Vancouver fire. By the time Thompson left Vancouver in 1999, the city had grown from 600 to over 10,000 people. Encouraged by this population boom, Thompson initiated the founding of a second Presbyterian church, St. Andrew's, in 1888. At the turn of the century, Vancouver supported five Presbyterian churches; 15 years later the number was 22.

In 1907, the Presbyterian church established Westminster Hall, a theological seminary in the West End of Vancouver. The Rev. John MacKay was appointed Principal, and he was joined by George C. Pidgeon and W.R. Taylor on the faculty. Westminster Hall was able to attract a wide variety of renowned visiting faculty from around Britain and North America by holding its classes in the summer time. The students maintained mission fields in the winter time; the year after Westminster Hall was opened, the Presbyterian church was able to open 15 new mission fields in Vancouver and the Fraser Valley.

By the time of the First World War, Vancouver had undergone many changes, with many established families leaving the urban core for the more attractive suburbs. First Presbyterian Church at Hastings and Gore found its numbers falling, and the new

residents were for the most part not English-speaking. The Rev. H.W. Fraser began a social work program in 1915, but by 1917 the impoverished church was in danger of losing its property. The following year the property was taken over by the Board of Home Missions and Social Service. With the appointment of J. Richmond Craig as Superintendent of the mission in 1921, the social service work was put on a sure footing. Craig had great gifts as a speaker and organizer, and he soon attracted large crowds to his church. Craig initiated the Welfare Industries, to gather articles worth salvaging and recycling, and to provide employment for the “down and out” of Vancouver. He also began Camp Fircom, on Gambier Island. First Presbyterian, and its Methodist equivalent, the Turner Institute, were amalgamated under Craig after church union.

Presbyterian work flourished between 1900 and 1925: A.S. Grant, George Pringle and A.D. MacKinnon began the northern and coastal marine missions, and the Woman’s Missionary Society established hospitals, homes and schools – like their Methodist Counterparts – in various parts of the province. By 1925 there were 125 Presbyterian ministers in on the roll, and the church had grown to 142 pastoral charges in B.C.

Presbyterianism is characterized by its adherence to a particular confession, the Westminster Confession, and its governing court structures of presbyteries and synods. But it would seem that most Presbyterians saw these church courts as representative of the local congregations. Thus while they had little in common with the Congregationalists doctrinally, in practice, if not in theory, the governance of the Presbyterian church was quite Congregational, and quite at odds with the centralized settlement system of placing ministers within the Methodist tradition. In both their theology and polity many Presbyterians saw the church as essentially a local presence, where correct doctrine was taught, the Word preached, and the sacraments were properly administered. The Presbyterian system was less suited to frontier life than was the Methodist centralized organization, and this may be an explanation for their relatively slower growth in B.C. up to 1885. We have also seen that tensions between the Scottish and Irish branches of Presbyterianism added to the difficulties of establishing the church in B.C. As well, the early Presbyterian missionary efforts in B.C. were aimed primarily at Presbyterians, unlike the Methodists who also directed their efforts toward reaching non-Anglo-Saxons and the Native Indians. Perhaps the biggest handicap was that the Presbyterian church was simply unable to provide enough missionaries to the field.

From the Presbyterian stream, the United Church inherited a “call” system for the placement of ministers in congregations. This meant that individual congregations could “call” or hire any minister they wished with very little negotiation with the higher governing bodies of the church. When this “call” system was placed alongside of the Methodist “settlement” system (whereby the Conference Settlement Committee was responsible for appointing all of the ministers to congregations in the Conference – in the case of B.C. Conference, an area covering all of British Columbia except the Peace River district), it is understandable that the United Church system whereby ministers are both “called” and “settled” has worked less than perfectly. Settlement Committees have the authority to overturn the call of a congregation to a minister, but almost never exercise it. In agreeing to the Congregationalist freedom from commitment to any particular creedal formulation of Christianity in the past, the United Church has found itself without the theological “bottom line” that the Presbyterian Church had held over the years. This confessional freedom within our church has been both an asset and a liability. But this takes us into the controversy over church union.

UNION AND AFTER

Since the days of the earliest missionaries, the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches in B.C. – as in other parts of Canada – had worked co-operatively, sometimes sharing pulpits, later sharing theological training. Early in the 20th century, preliminary proposals for union had been exchanged, and by 1908 a Basis of Union was formulated. For many, organic union seemed to be the logical next step of a Christendom that saw as its vision a new heaven and a new earth: a Christian Canada that would be a sign of the Kingdom of God. No less important were the practical difficulties of paying for over-extended denominations, with inherent duplication and inefficiency, in a country as large and unpopulated as Canada. Supporters of church union believed that union was theologically appropriate, taking literally the words in the prayer of Jesus (John 17:21), “that all might be one,” while critics saw these words as implying only a spiritual union of all Christians. While the Methodists and Congregationalists were nearly unanimously in favour of organic church union, the Presbyterians held three votes on the issue, and one-third of the Presbyterians across Canada were consistently opposed to organic union.

What made it possible for the three denominations to come together? While unionists believed that a united church would increase the moral influence of Christianity on the community – a stronger lobby against gambling and for temperance, and a broad commitment to social reform – it was the shared theological outlook that was crucial in crystallizing the church union movement. The unionists were committed to theological liberalism. This theological perspective had come to dominate European and North American Christianity in the late 19th century. The importance of liberal theology for the question of church union is that it distinguished between essential and non-essential elements of Christian faith. Things that are environmentally determined – such as the particular organizational principles of denominations, or the doctrinal particularities and creeds of any denomination – were seen to be non-essentials to the core of Christian faith. Thus, rather than seeing the church as a trust corporation in which its ministers were to be the guardians of unchanging practices and doctrines, the unionists saw the church as a living association, with a personality capable of change and evolutionary growth. For the unionists the Canadian environment made church union seem inevitable. The three things that made it possible for the Methodists, Congregationalists, and unionist Presbyterians to unite was that they shared the liberal theological outlook, they were broadly committed to social reform, and they were willing to overlook past differences.

By 1916 several congregations in western Canada were forming local unions with their neighbours, anticipating the decisions of the national churches. Thus it became increasingly difficult for the Presbyterian Church not to proceed into union, despite strong opposition and the knowledge that a remnant Presbyterian Church would continue after union. While all of the reasons for the Presbyterian resistance cannot be described here, the church union controversy was deep and painful to both sides, and many years passed before the United and continuing Presbyterian churches could begin to heal their wounds. In 1938, after a series of critical legal decisions, the United Church admitted that the Presbyterian church had not entirely vanished in 1925. It would seem proper that both the United and Presbyterian churches claim to share the identity of Presbyterianism. The United Church of Canada Act was altered to this effect in 1939, and a long and acrimonious battle was declared over.

In British Columbia, there was less resistance to church union than in eastern Canada. The main leaders of Presbyterian resistance were Dr. Leslie Clay of St.

Andrew's Church, Victoria, and Dr. R.G. MacBeth, of St. Paul's, Vancouver. Proponents of union were Principal W.H. Smith of Westminster Hall, J.S. Henderson and W.G. Wilson of Vancouver and Victoria, among others.

Of the 142s Presbyterian pastoral charges in B.C., all but 21 entered church union. Fifteen of the non-concurring congregations, however the larger urban churches of Vancouver, Victoria and New Westminster, reflecting the fact that nearly one quarter of the membership were opposed to union. The Methodist Church in B.C. brought into union 151 circuits, with 166 preaching points. The few dissenting Methodists moved into Pentecostal and Holiness Movement churches. While the Congregational Church had only four congregations in B.C. in 1925, the United Church did inherit their contribution of strong social awareness, and a radio station, now CKWX. There were also ten Local Union churches in B.C. all of whom, naturally, entered union.

The United Church of Canada was founded on June 10, 1925. The new church organized eight Presbyteries (local regional governing bodies) in British Columbia Conference. B.C. Conference held its first of the United Church held its first meetings at Wesley Church, Vancouver from October 31, 1925. A Methodist, Dr. A.M. Sanford, was elected President, and a Presbyterian, Peter Henderson, was elected Secretary of the Conference. Until 1941 it was the custom to alternate between former Presbyterians and Methodists for President, after which time denominational lines had faded. At the first meeting of B.C. Conference, the Rev. Gerald Switzer became the first person ordained to the ministry of the United Church in B.C.

One of the first results of church union was the founding of Union College on the new campus of the University of B.C. This was an amalgamation of Westminster Hall and Ryerson College. In May of 1927, the cornerstone of the new college was laid by Dr. S.D. Chown, former General Superintendent of the Methodist Church. Classes began in the fall of that year under Principal J.G. Brown, the former Principal of Ryerson College, and W.H. Smith, the former Principal of Westminster Hall. In 1929, they were joined by A.M. Sanford, the former Principal of Columbian College. The appointment of R.B.Y. Scott to the chair of Old Testament rounded out the faculty of the new college. Columbian College did not fare so well. It had become a residential high school and was increasingly redundant; after suffering deficits for several years in the 1920's, it could not carry on throughout the depression of the 1930's, and it was finally closed in 1936.

Following church union, a variety of amalgamations and realignments of local churches took place. In Vancouver, perhaps the biggest amalgamation was between Wesley Methodist and St. Andrew's Presbyterian. In 1930, the new St. Andrew's-Wesley United congregation became Vancouver's largest United Church, and it called Bishop Willard Brewing of the Reformed Episcopal Church to be its minister. When the new church was built in a stone gothic style and opened in 1933, it became the "cathedral" United Church of Vancouver.

The amalgamation of several adjoining congregations in B.C. created a surplus of ministers. Contributing to the problem of unemployed ministers was the fact that all congregations had the right to call any minister, yet the Settlement Committee of Conference had the responsibility of settling all ministers. The Conference found it difficult to prevent a minister from coming to B.C. if he was called by a congregation., and a great many more ministers wanted to come than there were places for. In 1930 an Conference Emergency Fund was begun to aid ministers in need who were either unemployed or were working in fields that could not pay the minimum stipend.

By this time the United Church was more or less organized, and it began to look outward to the future. Unfortunately, what it then saw was the Great Depression of the

1930's. Revenues and attendance declined; disillusionment spread across the land. Radical clergy and laity, though few in numbers, pressed for the Christian socialist cause. The League for Christian Social Action was organized by the Rev. Harold Allen and others who believed that socialist economic principles were implicit in biblical teaching. This group later became a part of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, a predominantly United Church Christian socialist movement that had units across the country. While the Christian socialists were not numerous, they were influential in the church courts. Some ran as candidates for the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the forerunner to the New Democratic Party of today.

Many United Church clergy and laypeople were more attracted to the Oxford Group Movement that swept across Canada from 1932 to 1935. With its large teams of international visitors – aristocrats, businessmen, former diplomats and various others thought to be famous – and its “House Parties” in all the finest hotel ballrooms, the movement provided a spiritual revival for many who felt threatened by the depression, but had no heart for socialist or Christian socialist alternatives. In Vancouver, the Oxford Group Movement was met by the past, present, and future mayors of the city: W.H. Malkin, Louis Taylor, and Gerry McGeer. Thousands of Vancouverites were packed into four halls for several nights running. Fifty-five church pulpits were filled by Oxford Group speakers: 30,000 heard their message. Thus it happened that in many congregations, “sharing” groups sprang up, where individuals would seek God’s guidance, and would be “changed,” and would live by “the four absolutes” of Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness and Love. Highly confessional public meetings and House Parties made the Oxford Group a great source of entertainment as well as spiritual enrichment, as members of “high society” shared a wide variety of their peccadilloes, trying to convince lesser mortals that they should not concern themselves with material things in the midst of the Great Depression.

With the depression, thousands of single unemployed men flocked into Vancouver in search of work, or at least in search of a warmer climate for the winter. Many of the congregations of the city tried to respond to the plight of these people. Wesley Church, First Church and the Scandinavian Mission organized soup lines; these were assisted by women from congregations around the city. Later, when the government had organized its relief system, First United Church, under the leadership of Andrew Roddan, continued to provide direct help to many thousands of people who did not qualify for government relief, many of whom were living in the “jungles” near False Creek and the Georgia viaduct. Roddan was a highly visible presence in Vancouver in the 1930's, but First Church's ministry in the depression was also supported by many volunteer laypeople, such as Andrew Turner, who led boys' work at the church for over 25 years.

The 1930's saw the United Church respond to the Great Depression in a variety of ways: a radical minority promoting a Christian socialist alternative; a more conservative body seeking solace in the Oxford Group; a great middle portion of the membership seeking to do what they could in immediate help for the unemployed, recognizing that without such help, the country might well face greater social unrest.

Beyond the response of the United Church to the economic crisis of the depression, the 1930's also saw Lydia Gruchy ordained by Saskatchewan Conference in 1936, the first woman ordained by the United Church. The first woman ordained in B.C. Conference was Dr. Norah Hughes, in 1940.

The outbreak of the Second World war came as a shock to many people in the United Church. Some of its leaders had been pacifists. A resolution of the B.C.

Conference of 1937 had declared: “This Conference affirms its belief that war is fundamentally opposed to the spirit and teaching of Jesus.” With the outbreak of war, many former pacifists struggled to reconcile the reality of the new situation to their pre-war stances. While some clergy and laity remained pacifist, and became conscientious objectors, most members fully supported the war effort. During the war, it became a common practice to sing the national anthem either during or at the end of church services.

Of particular concern to a few United Church people in B.C. during the war was the dislocation and internment of the Japanese Canadian people. Of the 25,000 Japanese in B.C., nearly 25% were associated with the United Church. Years of anti-oriental prejudice in B.C. reached a climax after the attack on Pearl Harbour, and all people of Japanese extraction were removed from coastal areas. Many were put in camps set up in the interior of B.C., such as New Denver, Kaslo, Slocan, Greenwood and Tashme. Enormous injustices were done to these people as they lost their homes, fishing boats, farms and any possessions that they could not carry. The United Church set up an Emergency Japanese Committee to help fight for the rights of the dislocated people, and to try to reduce the anti-Japanese feeling. While it seems clear that most members of the United Church shared the majority public opinion which was devoid of any degree of Christian charity, it is also true that most of the church leaders and missionaries went against the stream of public opinion. The work done by a handful of people from the Woman’s Missionary Society, and by returned missionaries and church leaders such as the Home Missions Superintendent, Percy Bunt, along with workers from the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, stands as a wonderful parable of Christian servanthood in an otherwise disgraceful moment in our history.

After the war, and throughout the 1950’s, the United Church in B.C. expanded as never before. The economy of the province boomed, and the population surged to new heights. Prosperity was everywhere. New housing developments required new churches. The United Church set up the Metropolitan Extension Council for Vancouver and Westminster Presbyteries, and appointed Dr. Douglas Telfer to head it in 1951. Between 1948 and 1965, fifty new congregations were begun in B.C. through the Metropolitan Extension Council in the Lower Mainland, and by the Home Missions Board in other parts of the province. As well, many older congregations rebuilt their existing church buildings. Church membership also began to rise in the post-war period. From a low of 36,900 members in 1941, the membership of the United Church in B.C. had risen to 70,000 by 1965. In this period, contributions increased sevenfold.

The expansion of the church in the 1950’s was also reflected in the Marine mission work. The isolated light houses, lonely settlements, logging camps and Native Indian villages on the coast of B.C. had been served by a variety of mission boats since the early days of Thomas Crosby – a ministry that was a symbol of Christian presence in a difficult frontier environment. But such presence had declined in the depression of the 1930’s and during World War II. In 1953, the West Coast Marine Mission was reopened after a 12 year shutdown. In the following years many mission boats plied the coastal waters for the United Church, but in time the rising costs of fuel contributed to the precariousness of this work than do the treacherous seas, and in the early 1990’s the Central Mainland Marine Mission work of the Thomas Crosby was discontinued.

One of the most significant post-war undertakings of the United Church was the Naramata Christian Leadership Training School. This School was the dream of the Rev. Bob McLaren, who had been impressed with the success of some of the fundamentalist Bible schools of Alberta. McLaren proposed to establish a centre that would teach

United Church young people skills that would help them as lay leaders of the church. The School enrolled its first class in 1947, under Bob McLaren who had been appointed Principal. McLaren was able to generate a special enthusiasm for the Naramata project, and succeeded in gathering up many "friends of the School" who generously donated their resources. As well as winter sessions, the Naramata Centre still provides a variety of short summer courses for the laity of the church. The Centre has continued to grow, and under the very creative leadership of the Principals, Directors and Staff that followed McLaren, the Centre has been a model of creative educational ministry. The Naramata Centre was the first of its kind in the United Church, and with its success, the church has developed three similar centres in other parts of Canada.

THE UNITED CHURCH TODAY

If the period from 1945 to 1965 was a time of expansion and growth in the United Church in B.C., the period from 1965 to 1975 has been a time of the shaking of foundations. Varieties of popular theology came and went with the seasons as consumer items in ecclesiastical *haute couture*. Given the rising spirit of political protest and cultural revolution that seemed to be everywhere, the nature of the United Church decreed that it in particular would experience the vertigo of the age. But the struggle was not merely a seeking after the novel or the trendy; it was also a serious desire to speak and act relevantly to a world where the traditional words did not address the experience of a great many people. One response of the United Church to the world of the 60's was its development of a "New Curriculum" for Sunday schools and adult study programs in 1964. While this curriculum was based on the results of modern higher critical reading of scripture, it was also based upon a more contemporary style of teaching. The New Curriculum was a success, but the patient died: between 1961 and 1975 the B.C. Conference Sunday school membership declined from 75,000 to under 20,000. Perhaps the New Curriculum required more time and preparation than some teachers had, but it would seem that the decline of the Sunday Schools had less to do with the New Curriculum, and more to do with the cultural anarchy of the age.

Another example of the response of the United Church in Vancouver to the 1960's was the development of the Vancouver Inner City Service Project. This project, initiated in 1967, functioned for several years as a training and service program for students of theology, law, social work and other disciplines in practical activities of all sorts: legal aid, community development, residents' associations, detached youth work, "hippie feed ins," etc. It was an exciting project, with many of the students living together in an old church, sharing a rich community life together as they learned about urban ministry and social action in Vancouver.

After many years of working together in the training of theological students, Union College of B.C. and the Anglican Theological College decided to join together to form the Vancouver School of Theology under Principal W.S. Taylor in 1971. In 1973, Principal Taylor retired and was replaced by Dr. James P. Martin. Today the Vancouver School of Theology attracts an increasingly diverse range of students, half of whom are women, from several denominations. Its innovative curriculum has become a model from which several other seminaries have learned.

Innovation and learning from the environment are key characteristics of the United Church. Responding to the special needs of British Columbia has been a major strength of the United Church in B.C. Yet the secular and self-satisfied spirit of British Columbians that made the founding of the churches here still remains a dominant part of

our cultural ethos. The geography of the province continues as an obstacle to settlement and communication. The United Church was in part founded to provide a better vehicle for responding to our human and physical environment. Over 75 years after church union we can still ask ourselves if the experiment was a success. There is a sense in which the “union” was more like a “lamination,” and some of the pieces are not very well glued together. Today we feel less rooted in our founding traditions and experience a less clear identity than some of us would desire. Yet today the United Church continues to be something of a new thing. In B.C. we continue as an experiment in hope. In each decade of the life of our church we have tried to respond to the real needs of the people in this corner of the world: in various mission projects, social services and urban ministries, in ethnic missions and ministry with the Native Indian people, in medical missions and in religious education, we have done both well and badly. Is the United Church a better vehicle for mission than were the three separate denominations? The final verdict is not yet in.

After Word: 2003

In the years from 1975 to 2000, the United Church in British Columbia has had more than its share of trials and struggles. While the decline in membership in some of our congregations has levelled off in the past 25 years, and some congregations are growing. At the same time other congregations have closed or been amalgamated. In the 1980’s our church struggled with the ordination of gay and lesbian people. In the 1990’s we have struggled to deal with the moral and legal implications of our operation of Indian Residential Schools, and in particular with litigation over cases of physical and sexual abuse in those schools. This has been a particular challenge in British Columbia Conference, as the first major court case for the United Church arose over abuse at the Alberni Indian Residential School in this Conference.

In general, the theological culture of our church has evolved considerably in the past 25 years. The United Church has also been influenced by the increasing array of spiritual practices have arisen on the broad cultural-religious smorgasbord we are surrounded by. “Spirituality” has been discovered to have more market cachet than “Religion” As well, in the past ten years there has been a growing interest in spiritual healing and “healing touch.” Several congregations now have practitioners of this particular enthusiasm. In our ways of worship, we are generally more inclined toward a more liturgical style of being. This has arisen in part perhaps because of our increasing work with ecumenical colleagues, most of whom – unlike ourselves – had a strong liturgical and sacramental worship tradition rather than a more Reformed church tradition. There are other issues, circumstances and situations that the United Church has been challenged by in the past twenty years, but a proper analysis of this period requires more time and a fresher set of eyes than mine to do justice to the task at the moment.