



A “Christmas Story” from our history Presbyterian Minister Discovers Gold on Christmas Day, Really

On Christmas Day, 1903, the Rev. John Pringle (a Presbyterian minister) and Richard Fullerton found gold and staked a claim on Christmas Creek near the south end of Kluane Lake, Yukon. Pringle had first served in Atlin, northern British Columbia, along one of the routes taken by prospectors into the Klondike. He then moved to serve the prospectors on the Creeks around Dawson. (Pringle would be moderator of the General Assembly in 1919.)

Pringle was one of a group of Presbyterian clergy who provided spiritual support to the prospectors and others who arrived in Dawson City and the Klondike during the gold rush and until 1910. The first one sent was the Rev. R. M. Dickey who had completed only two years of theological college in 1897 when the Rev. James Robertson, using his powers as Superintendent of Missions in the West, ordained him without permission of a presbytery. Robertson also committed significant funds to the mission without first checking with the committee responsible. Dickey headed to the Klondike less than 4 months into the all-out rush to the Klondike. But he was caught by the winter in Skagway, Alaska.

At the end of Dec. 1897, the Rev. A. S. Grant was sent to join Dickey. Grant arrived in Skagway in January 1898, being unwilling to wait for spring he went over the White Pass in February in what he described as “the herculean task of my life.” But it meant he arrived in Dawson City in May 1898. Dickey arrived in July, having gone over the White Pass in more favourable conditions.

By the end of 1898 there was a Presbyterian Church in Dawson City. Grant, who had taken three years of medical training at McGill, was in charge of the Good Samaritan Hospital in Dawson. Dickey was doing a circuit out of The Forks (also known as Eldorado). Much of Dickey’s work required visiting prospectors and miners in their cabins scattered along the creeks and streams that fed into the Klondike River. The ministry was built on face-to-face contact and leading ad hoc worship services in cabins and in other unusual settings. The church building in The Forks was built to be a community center in competition with the saloon. It was open daily with up-to-date newspapers, a small library, along with small gym and games room. These aspects were more important than the sanctuary.

To make my point: the church’s leaders with courage and at great risk responded to a need to carry the good news of Jesus to people who needed to hear a good word. In a place where many would be hurt and be broken financially, physically and emotionally, the church made sure it was present with a ministry fitting the context.

—*The Rev. Peter Bush, moderator of the 2017 (143rd) General Assembly*