



A Story for Black History Month – Feb. 2018

Just to give people a heads up -- history is a love of mine as many will know and the story I tell below I find unexpected and also moving. So bear with me as I indulge in one of my loves.

February is Black History Month and the Presbyterian History Moment for February is about a Black Presbyterian congregation in Calgary immediately prior to World War I.

We know little about this congregation, all I have found is snippets that appear in Acts and Proceedings in 1913 (p. 45), 1914 (p. 40) and 1915 (p. 43). If others have information that can give a fuller picture I would love to hear from you.

William Shearer, Superintendent of Missions for Central Alberta, reported to the 1913 Assembly: “About two years ago my attention was drawn to the fact that nothing was being done towards service the large [Black] population of Calgary with the Gospel.” The Black population of Alberta had started to grow rapidly after 1909 when racism in Oklahoma started to rise. A number of Black Oklahomans were attracted by the promise of free land and idyllic pictures of the Canada. “After interviewing some leading men and women among them, the use of the Moravian Church was obtained, and a Sunday afternoon service was started.” The congregation struggled through 1912, but by the end of the year had essentially folded for lack of a ministerial presence.

Despite the early failure Shearer was optimistic about the future because a Black student from Presbyterian College, Montreal was being recruited to serve the congregation for the summer of 1913. Mr. F. H. Bell, was listed among the students at Presbyterian College for the 1912-1913 year, as in First Year in Literary Course (that is, completing the prerequisites to take theology). I have been unable to find out anything about F. H. Bell beyond what is included in this story.

Mr. Bell arrived in Calgary at the start of April 1913, and a congregation quickly formed. A store front was rented to be the meeting space, Knox Church loaned the congregation chairs, and an organ was rented. In addition to the Sunday worship, Bell began week-night prayer meetings. The congregation was becoming a center for the spiritual life for some of the Black community of Calgary. The school year at that time ran from October to March, so Bell was able to stay 26 weeks leading worship and preaching. After he returned to school, an attempt was made within the congregation to keep “holding services among themselves”. But the load became too much for the leaders and the work was “discontinued.”

When the 1913-1914 academic year ended Bell returned to Calgary for the summer of 1914. That is the last we know of the congregation and of Bell’s ministry in the Presbyterian Church. By early 1915. Shearer was reporting, “Owing to a marked decrease in the [Black] population of Calgary it has been considered advisable to close this mission for the present.” Shearer did go on to praise Mr. F. H. Bell for “the quiet yet effective work” he had done. This phrase was, at the time, one of the highest compliments a minister could offer to a colleague.

We know Bell again was a student at Presbyterian College for the 1914-1915 year, but after that I can find no mention of him. He had had a “quiet yet effective” ministry for two summers in Calgary, a Black Presbyterian serving a Black congregation within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

—*The Rev. Peter Bush, moderator of the 2017 General Assembly*