



Good Samaritan Hospital,  
Klondike, Yukon

## Presbyterian History

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### *The Opening of the Women's Ordination Debate in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1952-1957*

by Peter Bush, Winnipeg, MB

The Synod of Manitoba meeting in October 1952 was presented with an overture moved by The Rev. H. Lloyd Henderson and seconded by The Rev. James Marnoch expressing the "opinion that the question of the status of women in positions of leadership in The Presbyterian Church in Canada needs clarification." The authors' hoped-for goal was "the Church may recognize the teaching of Scripture, that in Christ there is neither male nor female." The overture was sent to General Assembly.

2016 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the General Assembly's decision that women could be ordained as ruling elders and as ministers of Word and Sacraments. A complete telling to the story regarding the ordination of women would begin in the 1890's and would not reach a conclusion until 1981, this article has a far smaller focus exploring the period from 1952 to 1957. This period covers the first incarnation of the Assembly's Special Committee on the Place of Women in the Church under the convenorship of the Rev. Dr. Louis Fowler, Joint Clerk of the General Assembly.

The Synod minutes reveal nothing as to why Henderson and Marnoch introduced the overture. Understanding some of the context provides opportunity for some educated speculation. The years immediately after Church Union (1925) and then during World War II proved challenging for the Presbyterian Church in Western Canada.

Congregations found it hard to call pastors because there were no ministers available to be called. Smaller congregations had student ministers or catechists. These approaches led to gaps in ministry, and the gaps were filled in some cases by lay people preaching and in others by deaconesses. As the Committee on the Place of Women stated in 1955, "Certain women of the Church have exercised a full ministry in every detail except that of dispensing Sacraments." The next two paragraphs describe what took place in the Synod of Manitoba only.

Mrs. Mary MacKenzie, started a Sunday School on the east side of the Red River at Gonor, north of Winnipeg. The Sunday School evolved into a church, All People's Mission Church, with MacKenzie listed in the Acts and Proceedings as the minister of the congregation with the word Deaconess in brackets following her name. She served in this way until 1934 when at the age of 72 she retired. The 1929 Acts and Proceedings lists Miss M. Grigor as supply for the church in the Westfort district of (present-day) Thunder Bay. In both 1930 and 1931, Miss D. Jenkinson, Deaconess, was listed as the minister of the East Selkirk congregation. And in 1931, Miss I. Hunter was sent to start a congregation in the Riverview area of Winnipeg.

On the ruling elder side, no evidence has been found of women serving as elders in the standard way. However, women's names appear frequently

in the Acts and Proceedings as the Clerk of Session. What seems likely is that these women handled all correspondence for their congregation including Session related correspondence. Knox Church, Winnipegosis listed a succession of three women as the Clerk of Session in the 30 years from 1925 to 1955. Holmfield and Rose Valley listed a woman as Clerk of Session through the 1920's. And Mary E. Buckley was listed as Clerk of Session at Rolling River in the 1930's.

By the late 1940's and into the 1950's women's names appear less frequently in Acts and Proceedings as having leadership roles in their congregations. This paralleled a pattern in wider culture where the fluidity of gender roles present in the 1920's and again during the war years was being replaced by the stereotypically traditional values of the 1950's. Henderson and Marnoch, having served in the Synod of Manitoba for a number of years were aware of the role women had played in congregations in the Synod, they were mission minded ministers, interested in starting new churches, ministering with the First Nations communities, and in supporting small town congregations. To see those things accomplished more personnel was needed to do the work of the church. This concern was expressed in the third Whereas of the overture: "as Presbyterians, we have failed to give women equal status and responsibilities in the Church, and thereby have neglected to take advantage of a vast potential of Christian power and leadership."

The General Assembly did as the overture requested and established a special committee to explore the issue. The national structures of the church used the conversation about women's ordination to make a stewardship point. The Stewardship and Budget Committee ad on back page of the Nov. 1953, Presbyterian Record carried a quote from Joyce Adam who was the Editorial Assistant for Stewardship and Budget, it said, "It may be a 'man-size' job this million dollar budget, but it's my guess that it's a job for more than the men!" The ad went on to note "more women and young people are becoming self-supporting" therefore "the time has come for all Church

members" to contribute to the budget of the Presbyterian Church. The fact such an ad was run indicates, while the ordination question may have been contentious, people were able to maintain a sense of humour, at least in the early stages of the debate.

Strangely, the Committee's report to the 1954 Assembly was not available prior to Assembly, being distributed to commissioners on their arrival at Assembly, nor was it published with the Assembly minutes. The report sketched in brief the challenges of the conflicting Biblical texts, namely Galatians 3:28 and parallels on the one hand and I Timothy 2 and I Corinthians 14 on the other. The committee rejected secular social mores and patterns and even novel interpretations of church law as means of determining the road ahead, instead the way to proceed was "on Biblical principles and in the genius of this Church we all love." Three areas were raised for further reflection. First, were congregations taking full advantage of women's gifts? The Committee noted there were many roles women were allowed to play, for example, being on Boards of Managers, but women were not often asked to play these roles. The Committee urged congregations to take advantage of what was possible. Second, ordaining women would not solve the problem of women's place in the church. By this the committee meant ordaining women would not mean women would be receiving calls to congregations or be invited to be the heads of ministry teams in congregations. "The problems are deeper than the matter of ordination." Third, women's voices were not being heard in the decisions of the Assembly and the Committee believed this challenge needed to be addressed apart from the question of ordination. The Committee noted there were no women on the Assembly's Committee on the Place of Women.

The Committee received permission to continue working, and was allowed "to take into consultation representative women of the church." The Committee requested, "if the question of ordinations is to be studied, the Committee be so instructed." The Rev. Lloyd Henderson, who was a

commissioner to Assembly in 1954 moved a motion which was seconded and adopted, that “the Committee be instructed to make a full study and report on all aspects of this question – including the matter of ordination.” Rarely does the author of an overture get the opportunity to advocate for it at General Assembly.

The Committee expanded from five to eleven with the addition of six women. From what can be gathered from reports (the minutes of the Committee are not extant) the women had equal voice and vote with the men on the Committee.

Again in 1955 as had happened in 1954 the Committee’s report was distributed to Commissioners upon their arrival at Assembly and the report was not printed with the minutes of the 1955 Assembly. During its year of deliberations, the Committee had invited Prof. F. Scott Mackenzie of Presbyterian College and Prof. David W. Hay of Knox College to present briefs.

Mackenzie sought to locate the ordination question within the larger task “of discovering and declaring what the Christian doctrine of woman really is.” The church was discriminating in who could be ordained and who could not, the question was what was the source of that discrimination? The answer was not to be found “coming in at the end with a reluctant move” agreeing with “what secular society is already saying in clear and unmistakable tones.” Rather, the church should, “take a position, based squarely on proper understanding of the teaching of Holy Scripture and the substance of the Christian faith...The voice of the Church, here as elsewhere, must carry the accent, not of expediency but of authority, and we know where the Source of our authority rests.” The conversation was to be Biblical and theological, societal pressures were to be resisted.

Hay, following a discussion of Calvin’s and Knox’s understandings of the role of women raised the question of whether those views were to be accepted as doctrine in the present, or simply understood as past doctrine in a previous time. Turning to Galatians 3:28, he noted Paul’s words lead to theological emancipation of women as persons in Christ in the same way men are persons in Christ. Thus male headship was challenged by Paul’s words. Hay’s argument took an unexpected turn when he moves to think about the ministerial vocation, “A proper doctrine of the ministry carries with it the belief that it is a commitment for life.” Men, single, married, fathers,

were able to make a total commitment to the prime vocation of ministry just as single women could, but women as mothers were not able to fulfill that commitment. This gendered understanding of women’s capability led

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Hay to suggest ordaining women who promised to remain single and to a radical expansion of the role of the deaconess. He opened the door to women’s ordination in this way, “My own view is that we should in this new situation, be ready for a little, closely-guarded experimentation.”

The Committee on the Place of Women reported to Assembly there were two views in the church: one, holding that women should be given the opportunity to be ordained, that is be taken on by presbyteries as candidates for ministry and offered courses by the colleges leading to ordination; the other view was that while men and women are equal they do not have the same function, thus women should seek ways of serving in the church that did not involve ordination. Seeing no way to solve this division the Committee proposed a two-pronged approach, first, that a poll of presbyteries and presbyterials be taken to discover where the church stood regarding the ordina-

tion of women, and second, that the committee move towards making “concrete proposals for the increased use of the talents of women in the Church.” The poll asked two questions: “(A) Do you favour the ordination of women to the Ruling Eldership? (B) Do you favour the ordination of women to the Ministry?”

During this time women seeking to become deaconesses were certified by their presbyteries to be trained for “the office of deaconess” but there was no examination by presbytery at the end of their training prior to their being designated for their work. The Presbytery of West Toronto overtured the 1955 Assembly to change this, so those seeking to be designated as deaconesses would be examined by their presbytery in the same way that those seeking ordination were examined at the end of the theological training. The Assembly regarded this overture worthy of consideration. The 1957 Assembly was to approve a process leading to the designation of deaconesses very similar to the process leading to the ordination of ministers.

To assure discussion of the two questions the Committee prepared a pamphlet including the Committee’s 1954 and 1955 reports and the briefs from Mackenzie and Hay. Three copies of the pamphlet were sent to each congregation in the denomination, every presbytery and presbyterial received copies and copies were sent to all overseas staff. All of this was followed up by Louis Fowler’s article in the Sept. 1955 *Record*. The article had two purposes; to make clear that the voting was a poll and not a decision, an actual decision would, Fowler noted, “require a reference to all Presbyteries under ‘The Barrier Act’ of our law, and a majority vote.” And secondly to re-iterate what was becoming a theme for the Committee, the “immediate problem is not the ordination of women, but the making of the talents of women effective in the local church.”

The *Record* had remained remarkably silent about the ordination of women question. Only one printed letter to the editor and four articles were found in the period from June 1953 to June

1956; Fowler’s article mentioned above and three published in May 1956.

The Rev. Frank S. Morley, minister of Grace, Calgary, wrote in his “Women Should Be Ordained!”, that the Bible recounted a number of women doing ministry and that practiced had continued into the Middle Ages. Protestantism, Morley suggested, was the force that kept women’s activity “largely confined to the home.” The rise of the missionary movement had seen an increase of ministry roles for women. The conclusion to be drawn from this recounting was, “Women with talent and time have quite as much right as men to preach the Gospel. If Jesus sent a woman to proclaim the news of His resurrection, why does not His Church?” The article then took a surprising twist as Morley launched into a critique of the Women’s Missionary Society. The doing of mission had been lost to “an impersonal collecting” of funds. The evangelistic heart was gone. Only by reviving the mission vision still present in some parts of the church would the hoped-for future arrive.

Taking the other side was The Rev. Dr. John A. Johnston. Reading the article it is at times unclear if he was presenting a position because that was his assignment or if he was presenting an argument he agreed with. The first objection was practical, the world was “not ready to receive women in an authoritative ordained capacity.” Johnston then turned to the Biblical passages in which Paul forbade women from preaching not just in Corinth, but “in all the churches of the saints.” The third objection was theological. The functions of ministry had been shaped by the church over the years to fit the life patterns of men. Johnston concluded with the question, “If a woman feels herself called to the ministry, would it be right to ordain her into this male-centered office?” Instead the way ahead was that “a new office should be developed which would employ best the varied and unique qualities of womanhood.” Johnston did not have space to expand on what such a female-centered office would look like. But women should not be ordained to the male-centered office.

The third article in the trio was written by L. Jean Black a graduate of Victoria College, Toronto, who completed her training at Ewart College in May 1955. At the time of the article she was Director of Christian Education at St. Andrew's, Port Credit. The well-written article is essentially a plea to the church to allow women to use their gifts in whatever direction those gifts took them. The conclusion is worth quoting at length:

It is true that men and women are equal – but equal in the Christian sense of the equality of every individual before God; equal as sinners; equal in opportunity to develop such various

gifts as they may have; equal in opportunity for mutual service and sacrifice; and receiving in equal measure the grace of God in Christ, free and without distinction, “neither male nor female.” For men and women who live within the

Church in these days, true fulfillment can only be found in the reconciliation which Christ give us, as He reconciles us to Himself and hence to each other. As women we ask that the Church will have room for us, will believe in and recognize our call, will give us encouragement and guidance as we seek to fulfill that call, and that it will allow us to serve with our best efforts of heart and mind the Saviour who created us, and who redeemed us.

Black had presented the most Christo-centric argument of the three.

The Committee reported the results of the poll to the 1956 Assembly. Thirty-four of the forty-eight presbyteries (71%) had participated, 171 elders (ruling and teaching) favoured the ordination of women as Ruling Elders, with 391 opposed. The vote was even more decisive on ordination of women to Ministry of Word and Sacra-

ments, with only 91 elders (ruling and teaching) in favour and 458 opposed. Presbyterials (the Women's Missionary Society structure) had also been asked their opinion, only twenty-nine of fifty-two (56%) participated. On the question of women's ordination as Ruling Elders the vote was close, with 826 members of the WMS in favour and 908 opposed. On the question of women's ordination to Ministry the results were more decisive, 638 in favour and 1,113 opposed. Many of the presbyteries and presbyterials provided comments on the questions which were distributed to commissioners, unfortunately that material

has been lost. (If anyone has the mimeographed sheets that were distributed tabulating the response of the presbyteries and presbyterials, the Presbyterian Church Archives would love to have a copy.) The Committee had invited people from across the church

(including deaconesses and lay people) to submit responses to the questions about the ordination of women and the wider discussion about the place of women in the church. Twenty-six people sent in comments. The results of the straw vote were a “no” to women's ordination. Fowler had described the Committee's goal in asking the questions this way, “What is the Church really thinking about the status of women? We are eager to arouse congregations from their pleasant slumbers and bovine contentment with things as they have been, to get them to grapple with this problem.” The lower than expected response and, from the Committee's point-of-view, disappointing results raised questions about whether congregations had been “aroused”.

The Committee brought a series of recommendations to the Assembly, among them, “That this Assembly declare, in view of the state of mind

*“As women we ask that the Church will have room for us, will believe in and recognize our call, will give us encouragement and guidance as we seek to fulfill that call, and that it will allow us to serve with our best efforts of heart and mind the Saviour who created us, and who redeemed us.”*

revealed in the replies, the Church is not ready to receive women ordained to the Ruling Eldership or Ministry, and therefore the specific action towards this end, which would eventually be under the Barrier Act, be deferred"; which was approved. The time was not right to move towards women's ordination. Such a move would require an approval process under the Barrier Act. Feeling blocked from pursuing women's ordination the Committee turned to other aspects of the relationship between men and women in the church. The Committee "being disturbed about the lack of unity in the life of congregations" asked all levels of the church to examine ways in which men and women could work together in better harmony. One suggestion the Committee had, "That Assembly encourage all congregations to avail themselves of the right to have women on the Board of Management." This recommendation was also adopted. Whether or not ordination of women became a reality, the conflict between men and women needed to be addressed.

The Committee was again disappointed with the response it received. Two thousand copies of the 1956 report were distributed in pamphlet form to every minister and every presbyterial, only six presbyteries responded with thirty-eight presbyterials (75%) responding. The women of the church understood there needed to be a way for their voice to be heard. The Committee understood that voice had to be heard within the courts of the church if it was going to have an impact. Using the ordination of women as the means to get women's voices heard would be ineffective, because it would take a long time for women's voices to become numerous enough in the courts of the church for those voices to be more than token voices.

The Committee proposed a radical approach, the creation of councils of men and women at each level of the church except Session. The presbytery council would include minister and elder from each congregation (presbytery) along with a woman from each congregation and all deaconesses serving in the presbytery. The council would deal with all administrative business

coming before the presbytery and could also discuss "doctrine, government, worship and discipline and make recommendations concerning them." All the items a presbytery might deal with were to be discussable by the council. Immediately following the council meeting the presbytery would meet to deal with the business giving "formal ratification to the acts and proceedings of the Council." The presbytery, synod and assembly would have the right to vote in a direction different than the council voted, "but it is not anticipated that the Court at any level would lightly veto those acts and proceedings in which it has already given its voice in debate in the meeting of the Council." The presbytery, or other courts of the church, would be hard pressed to explain how men and women sitting together could make one decision and once the women had no vote decide something else. This proposal was the result of the Committee's conviction women's voices needed to be heard in the courts of the church in such numbers as to have an impact, an impact that was needed as soon as possible. The proposal failed to gain traction in the church and was set aside as an idea to be ridiculed by all sides in the conversation.

The Committee on the Place of Women in the Church had in the early years of its existence eyes on a broader question than ordination. The Committee sought to create an environment in which women, ordained or not, would have the space and support needed to use their gifts within the church. When the path to ordination was blocked the Committee sought to make a way for women's voices to be heard in the courts of the church, believing the church needed women's voices as it moved into a new time. The Committee's attempts to frame a larger conversation on the role of women in the church failed to garner much attention. The church at large was focused on the debate about ordination. Following the failure of "council" idea the Committee largely gave up on seeking to have a wider conversation about the role of women joining in the narrower conversation about ordination.

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## *Historical Vignette*

Radio provided new opportunities for the church to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. The General Assembly's Committee on Radio Broadcasting assisted the church in thinking about these matters and developed programs that congregations could use. The Committee had representatives on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's National Religious Advisory Council. The Council served to allocate the free air time CBC offered the various church for the broadcast of religious services.

By the 1950's television was a new technology whose power was beginning to be understood. In 1952, Bishop Fulton Sheen, the Roman Catholic radio personality, became the first religious personality in the United States with a television program. The following year, Admiral Television Corporation, which produced Sheen's program offered to pay CBC for the air time to run the program. Admiral wished to run a one minute ad at the start of the program and a one minute ad at the end. The issue of "commercially sponsored religious television programs" was debated by the Advisory Council for eighteen months. In the end the Council voted in favour of allowing the program, with the two Presbyterian representatives, The Rev. J.M. Milroy of Roger's Memorial Church, Toronto and The Rev. D. McCullough, Director of Church Extension, being the only dissenting voices.

The General Assembly's Committee on Radio Broadcasting printed their dissent in its 1955 report:

*We hereby dissent against the action which was taken by the National Religious Advisory Council at its regular meeting held in Thursday, September 9, 1954, when it approved commercially sponsored religious television programs, for the reasons stated below:*

- 1. The sole purpose of religion is to proclaim the redemptive message of Christ; the Gospel of Jesus Christ denies to both Church and State the right to sell or buy its truth to be used for only their own gain; to sell a product in the name of, or by the use of, religion is to deny its fundamental character.*
- 2. It opens up the whole field of religious radio and television to the highest bidder, who can then exploit it for selfish purposes. The door is now open for any commercial firm desiring to present a like program to demand the same privilege and that demand will have to be satisfied.*
- 3. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the National Religious Advisory Council yielded to well organized pressure which leaves the way open to all other pressure groups.*
- 4. The inherent danger in allowing any commercial firm to finance and sponsor any religious radio and television program, will inevitably lead to its dictating the policy and message of the Church.*
- 5. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had departed from its avowed policy.*

The Committee went on to note the dissent was widely distributed in the church and a number of presbyteries and synods lobbied the government against the program being commercially aired. The debate created enough bad publicity that Admiral Television Corporation offered the program to CBC at no charge and without ads or "credit line."

Worried that the protest might be seen as anti-Catholic, the Committee on Radio Broadcasting noted:

*The Committee wishes to make it clear that there was no opposition at any time on the part of our two representatives or the Committee to the Bishop Fulton Sheen program, as such, but rather to the fact that it was being sponsored by a commercial firm which stood to gain financially.*

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## Book Review

Alan Wilson, *Highland Shepherd: James MacGregor, Father of the Scottish Enlightenment in Nova Scotia*, (University of Toronto Press, 2015), 256 pgs., index, 6 illustrations.

James MacGregor's influence on the shape of Presbyterianism in the Maritimes is hard to overestimate. Arriving in 1786 and serving until his death in 1830, MacGregor preached the good news of the gospel not only in the communities around Pictou, but he travelling to PEI, Cape Breton, and through the Chignecto Isthmus to New Brunswick when the weather was favourable. Through his ministry a base was laid for the strength of Presbyterianism in the Maritimes.

Wilson locates MacGregor within the Scottish enlightenment of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, where the minister was concerned about all aspects of community life: spiritually (the kirk); educationally (the development of schools and eventually Pictou Academy); economically (the improvement of farm practices and the push to develop a sustainable economic base around Pictou); and socially (the development of community based societies). Wilson notes MacGregor's connection with the Mi'kmaq community, adding to our understanding of the early First Nation-Settler relationships in the Pictou region. MacGregor's anti-slavery letter is discussed and well analyzed.

The tensions between MacGregor and Thomas McCulloch regarding ministry style and especially regarding Pictou Academy are a backdrop against which the later part of the book is written. Wilson is at pains to argue MacGregor laid the groundwork which allowed McCulloch to bring the Academy into being.

The book is at its best discussing MacGregor's first nine years of ministry, when he was alone as a pioneering minister seeking to serve a pioneering community. Providing insights into MacGregor's deep desire to see people connect with the church and through the church to Jesus Christ, we see MacGregor's heart.

Wilson is to be thanked for this new biography of an important Presbyterian.

## History Prize Winner for 2015

The winner of the Congregational History Prize presented by the Committee on History of the General Assembly was:

*Journey to the Western Sea: 100 Years of the British Columbia Synodical of the Women's Missionary Society, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1914-2014*

Writing the history of an organization like the WMS is a challenge. The first challenge is determining the lens to use in exploring the story: a lens that begins with the grassroots, recognizing the WMS is made up of dozens of groups of women in congregations across the province of British Columbia, or a lens that starts with the work of the staff of the WMS within the Synod. The approach used will dramatically shape the telling of the story.

Journey to the Western Sea seeks to use both lenses in telling the story of the WMS in British Columbia, exploring the development of presbyterials (local lens) and describing the work of the nurses at St. Andrew's Hospital in Atlin, BC along with other WMS staff.

The second challenge is archival evidence is often insufficient to tell the story, as the compilers note, "source materials were difficult to obtain and records within presbyterials went astray once they disbanded."

Despite these challenges Journey to the Western Sea paints an evocative picture of the work of the WMS on the edge of the western sea. As the compilers note the WMS was about Mission Bands, Explorers, Children of the Church and CGIT groups all of which had a far larger impact than one would expect from the gatherings of middle aged women which many picture when they think of the WMS.

Unfortunately copies of Journey to the Western Sea are not available for purchase, since all the copies printed have sold.

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