



## Presbyterian History

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# *The Forward Movement in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1918-1920*

by Peter Bush

Many Canadian Presbyterian congregations whose beginnings pre-date World War I have a plaque in the shape of a shield with metal maple leaves bearing the names of persons from the congregation who served during what became known as the Great War. These plaques were part of the Peace Thank-offering and Forward Movement with which the PCC marked the end of WWI.

As the war dragged on into 1918, Presbyterian Church leaders were concerned about the spiritual toll the war was taking on the nation and sought to waken Canadian Christians “to the duty imposed upon them by the conditions growing out of the war.” “The conviction is deepening that the witness of the Church has been too feeble and too much permeated with the spirit of the world to rightly interpret to the world the spirit of Jesus Christ.” The church had a role to play in proclaiming hope to the world, but it had been compromised by accepting the values of the war, nationalism, and economic greed. The church’s voice had been muted. Thus at the 1918 General Assembly (held only 2 months after the Battle of the Somme during which the Germans demonstrated that they were not going to be easily defeated and the war looked like it would continue indefinitely) commissioners heard a commissioner’s overture signed by 140 ruling and teaching elders asking for the implementation of the Forward Movement in the PCC. The request included the following:

Whereas, this war is making it more manifest than ever before that the hope of the world lies in the awakening of a Christian consciousness powerful enough to dominate all other forces and enlist them in the service of humanity...

The General Assembly is therefore humbly overtured to issue a call to united prayer, to re-consecration of life and wealth, and to such other practical efforts as will help to secure:

1. A fuller witness to the power of Christ to heal the wounds of humanity, meet the immeasurable need of hungry souls, and regenerate the world;
2. The attraction of candidates to the ministry in such numbers and quality as will meet the requirements of the Church at home and abroad;
3. The reinforcement of the financial position of the Church so as to make adequate provision for the maintenance and expansion of all her work.

The Assembly concurred with the overture and the Committee of the Fifty was established to implement steps which would: 1. deepen “the service of Christ” in through prayer and individual consecration; 2. secure candidates for ministry and other work in the mission of the church; and 3. raise funds for both the local and national church (the national goal set in 1919 was for \$4 million, which in 2018 funds would be \$52 million).

In the midst of the on-going war, leaders in the church stepped back and asked about the cost of the war in spiritual terms, in missional terms. The abil-

ity to step away from the barrage of new information about the war that filled the media of the day and ask searching questions about the way the church's work in Christ's name was being hampered took foresight and courage.

The war's end gave the committee fresh impetus for now they could focus on thankfulness for the war's end and the peace that had been secured. The Committee returned to the 1919 Assembly with an ambitious plan which sought to mobilize the people in the pews towards the spiritual renewal of the nation. Presbyterians were not alone in this endeavour working with Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Methodists. This article will explore the Presbyterian expression of the Forward Movement.

In what follows it would be easy to focus on the financial aspects of the initiative, but to do so would be to miss the spiritual disciplines taught and enhanced. The Forward Movement was more than a fund-raising initiative. The Committee of the Fifty were quickly organized into six sub-committees to develop plans for moving forward in their area of responsibility: Prayer; Stewardship; Recruits for the Ministry; Literature and Publicity; Educational Campaign; and Financial Objective and Time and Method of Financial Campaign.

The Sub-Committee on Prayer set the tone for the Forward Movement with the bold reaffirmation of "the conviction of the Church that the Word of God interpreted and applied by the Holy Ghost in answer to prayer is the divinely appointed agency for the conversion of human beings and for the emancipation and reconstruction of society in the World." Thus prayer was central to the church's endeavours seeking the restoration of humanity in the wake of the war. The prayer life of the church was enhanced in three ways. First, individuals and households

were to be encouraged to engage in regular "family worship", this daily gathering for prayer and Bible reading was supported by published material which included prayers for each day of the week. The prayers covered the local church; leaders and institutions in the community; missionaries overseas and the countries in which they lived; asked God to provide more workers for Christ's ministry in the world; and prayers for the Spirit to shape the lives of believers. These formal times of "family worship" were to be supplemented by individuals each

day at noon, wherever they were, pausing for a few moments and "lift the heart in supplication" that God's "weary heritage be refreshed." Second, a League of Prayer was created inviting people to commit to pray regularly and frequently for the Forward Movement. They pray-ers would be provided with information for prayers that were "definite, intelligent and prevailing." Third, that a denomination-wide day of prayer be held allowing Presbyterians from coast to coast to coast to join together in prayer.

Stewardship, as understood by the Sub-committee on Stewardship, was about the "proportionate" giving of both time and money. To underline this point it was asserted, "Every adult Christian should be actively engaged in some definite form of Christian service." That was understood to mean, that either the individual was doing a ministry connected to the church or was serving in the community in a way that lifted up the name of Jesus Christ. Further, part of Christian service was to be engagement with the next generation, passing on both life knowledge and the "best of all the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

In addition to time and ability, stewardship was also about financial giving. Money was to be given "proportionately" for there was a "responsibility for extending the kingdom both at home and

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abroad.” The extension of the reign of God required financial support.

The giving of time and money was to be “sacrificial.” In the years following World War I, sacrificial language always carried the memory of the thousands who had died in the war. Thus the sacrifice being called for in terms of time, talent and treasure had a very high threshold attached.

The committee seeking to recruit men (only men were ordained as clergy at the time) to be ministers and women and men to serve as missionaries overseas and at home was confronted with a deep challenge in the summer and early

fall of 1918. The war was still on. Many young men were overseas pushing down enrollments in theological colleges and even in the diaconal training program numbers were down since women were being urged to find employment in non-traditional occupations. Even after the Armistice in Nov. 1918 it took months for the soldiers to return home, and many returned injured in body, mind and spirit. Despite these challenges the Committee set an ambitious goal of recruiting 500 clergy, 200 diaconal personnel, and 300 lay people to serve as missionaries primarily overseas.

The sub-committee on recruitment identified eight factors hampering students from enrolling in theological college. The usual suspects were on the list: poor salaries, lack of flexibility in college curriculums, and poor job security. The requirement of adherence to the Subordinate Standards was named as a dis-incentive to some of those seeking to discern if they had a call to ministry. The question of poor salaries would become a sub-theme in material produced by the Forward Movement. A flyer distributed to congregational leaders asked: “Are you paying your Pastor sufficient to enable them to support themselves and their family decently and provide himself with books? Why not begin the Forward Movement by at once putting their support on a New Era basis?” In this new time what was the appropriate stipend for a minister?

In the end the Recruitment Committee came to the conclusion individuals would be open to the call to ministry through “a new emphasis on the dignity and importance of the ministerial office and the grandeur of the supreme adventure which the Christian Ministry offers in the world situation of the present and coming days.” When ministry was seen as a grand and holy adventure, it was hoped individuals would begin to hear the call to ministry in a new way.

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The Literature and Publicity group developed bulletins and pamphlets, gathered stories to be published in the *Record* and other Presbyterian publications,

and developed lantern slides to be shown in local congregations. At the distance of 100 years this plan sounds archaic until one realizes that the church was making use of the most advanced technology available at the time. The pamphlets had three purposes, to give content for people to pray about in the family altar time, to inform adults about the work of the church, and to mobilize people to give to and to serve in the ministries of the church.

The Educational campaign focussed on children and young people. The committee put the challenge bluntly, even though the Sunday schools across the country were growing in number and enrollments were increasing, “the stubborn facts remain that the Sunday School loses 50% of its membership before reaching the age of twenty-one years, and that nearly 75% do not attend the regular services and are not in full communion with the church.” As the Education committee argued, “There is cause here for searching of heart as to the whole spirit and method of our work among children. Christian education must be given a larger and surer place in Home, School, Church, and Community.” The Committee sought to build on the already existing programs of Sunday School and Mission bands. There was encouragement to congregations to start less formal Sunday evening services that would be more inviting to young people. The suggestion was

to have fellowship times for young people following the evening services.

A look through congregational histories will indicate that during the 1920's additions were put on church buildings and church halls were upgraded, all with the goal of modernizing the Christian education experience. Graded Sunday School classes became common requiring ways to divide church halls. Chalk boards were added as Sunday Schools adopted the patterns of education present in the secular school system.

Such upgrades cost money and the Forward Movement became a way to raise the needed funds.

The Financial Campaign was centered in congregations. Each congregation was to establish a Forward Movement Committee which would hopefully be chaired by "the strongest, most aggressive person available." Every home in the congregation was to be visited by carefully chosen and trained canvassers who would place the claims for the dual focus of campaign. The Peace Thank-offering was to be collected in Nov. 1919, a year after the Armistice was signed. The Presbyterians set a goal of \$4 million. The Peace Thank-offering was a program taking place simultaneously in Methodist, Anglican, and Congregationalist churches along with Presbyterian. The total goal among the four denominations was for \$11 million (which in 2018 funds would equal \$144 million.) This target was achieved and surpassed as church goes across Canada gave in Nov. 1919. These funds went to the national level of the various denominations. For Presbyterians there was a second financial focus, doubling congregational annual budgets over five years so congregations could provide better stipends to their ministers, could keep their buildings maintained and be able to fund upgrades if needed,

and would have resources to increase their support of the denominations mission at home and overseas.

The handful of scholarly articles written about the Forward Movement ask questions about how successful the program was. The easiest metric to use in evaluating the Movement is the financial one and looking at the Peace Thank-offering the Movement succeeded. Some congregations saw increased givings, some congregations grew dramatically; in other congregations little seemed to hap-

pen. It is much harder to determine if the spiritual temperature of the denomination rose as a result of the Forward Movement. What can be said is that there was a widespread felt need for an enhanced spiritual life in the denomi-

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nation, a spiritual life robust enough to withstand the distraction and destruction being wreaked by the war. A spiritual life that would be able to offer hope of a new, redeemed, and reconciled world. A world in which the church would point to the One who had come to redeem and reconcile all things. It was a bold vision. The vision would come into being as local congregations "wisely and sympathetically planned to bring every person face to face with Jesus Christ." Such encounters with Jesus Christ would lead followers of Jesus to live "an applied Christianity that will heal our social wounds, bringing every national interest under the control of Jesus Christ." This would be the awakening of the Christian consciousness for which the presenters of the overture had hoped and prayed. With boldness and courage the leaders of the church sought to provide both materials and a plan for the church to live into this vision.

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## ***HISTORICAL VIGNETTE***

The Rev. R. P. Mackay, Secretary of the Foreign Missions Committee (the first full-time program staff at the national level in the PCC) for more than three decades, was named to spearhead the prayer portion of the Forward Movement. Two pieces he wrote for the *Presbyterian Record* give an insight into the role, it was hoped, prayer would play in the Forward Movement.

*Presbyterian Record*, Sept. 1918, Vol. 43, #9, p. 261

### ***PRAYER AND THE FORWARD MOVEMENT***

*The Executive of the Committee appointed by the General Assembly on the Forward Movement met and did some preliminary work. Amongst the sub-committee appointed was one on Prayer.*

*All are agreed that the Forward Movement is the biggest proposition that ever faced our Church. "Give me a great thought" was the dying cry of a noted writer.*

*Here we have it – an attempt to get the Church to throw as much enthusiasm into the Lord's work as is being done in the present world-war.*

*It is essentially a spiritual problem. It is supernatural and can only be done by the Holy Spirit in answer to prayer.*

*Prayer is the greatest weapon ever put into the hands of humanity. It can remove mountains. It can open rivers in high places and springs in the midst of the valleys. It can make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.*

*Is it not worth while trying at this time to do an unusual thing in the interests of the Kingdom?*

*The proposal is that a Prayer League be organized to get behind the Forward Movement with such a volume of prayer as will fill the sails.*

*I appeal to the "shut-ins" who have learned the great secret, and to all others who would care to be enrolled in such a fellowship of intercession.*

*We are just opening a campaign and there will be room for new suggestion and method as the days advance. In the meantime, who are willing to be enrolled as volunteers in a service that will bring enrichment to ourselves and blessing to the World? If the appeal finds a response on the heart express it by the next mail.*

*R.P. Mackay, Toronto Secretary, FMC*

*Presbyterian Record*, April 1919, vol. 44 #4 p. 113

*Without the quickening Spirit all the organization in the world will not save a single soul. It is also true in Spiritual as in other matters, that the highest and best is most difficult to acquire. How much simpler it is to go out and organize even on a large scale than it is to spend days in the Upper Room.*

*The difficulty is evident to anyone who has had experience in Church Courts. All are agreed as to relative values, but how meager the portion of time given to the more important thing! There would be no need of a Forward Movement had the emphasis always been in the right place...*

*If this Forward Movement fails, it will fail just there – by too great a share of energy and attention having been given to the organization and too little to that patient waiting, the agonizing intercession that will not accept refusal. The Master's Word is ever true and ever will be true. "Without me ye can do nothing." "Ask and receive that your joy may be full."*

## *God has no grandchildren*

Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

The evidence is everywhere; the capital "T", capital "C" The Church in Canada is shrinking. Fewer people are in church than there used to be, we can all point to churches that have closed, to church buildings that are for sale. We all know people who once went to church but no longer do. The number of young families in church is down. I can hear readers naming churches in their community that are busy and full and growing. Yes, not all congregations are in decline, but I say again: the capital "T", capital "C" The Church in Canada is shrinking.

Clarke and Macdonald demonstrate just how steep the decline has been. They do so with a blizzard of numbers. I am intentionally limiting the statistics quoted in this review, because statistics can become both intimidating and confusing. But some figures are important to understand and here is one that should stick in our heads and move our hearts. "In 2011, the number of de- and non-churched had jumped to 17.9 million Canadians, accounting for 55% of Canada's population." (209) This 55% does not include persons of other faiths, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, etc. Over half of Canadians identify themselves as having no religion or, while identifying with a religious group, have quit attending a place of worship. The 55% includes about 25% who identify themselves as having "no religion."

The de-churched, about 30% of Canadians, are those people, who while knowing the name of the church they do not attend, no longer attend church; including those who were confirmed as members and promptly left the church and those who having served the church for many years suddenly in their 50's or 60's resigned from everything and left church. Also included are individuals who

have been hurt by the church. The de-churched have experienced church but don't want more experiences of church.

Drilling down into one of the figures Clarke and Macdonald present. In 1991, 14% of Canadians age 24 to 45 claimed "No Religion"; by 2011, 28.7% of that age group was claiming "No Religion" (in population terms that is an increase from about 700,000 to 1.7 million). That is huge growth. When it is recognized this is the age group most likely to be raising children (0-14 year olds), it is quickly apparent that a large portion of two generations of Canadians have "No Religion". Non-churched persons have rarely if ever been to church (maybe a wedding or a funeral), don't know what happens in church, and are not particularly interested in discovering what happens in church. They would not think of turning to the church in times of trouble or joy. The church is irrelevant to their lives.

One in four Canadians have "no religion", that means they don't know the Christian story, don't know the meaning of Christmas and Easter, have not heard of the hope of the resurrection of Jesus, have not heard of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to bring healing and hope. How will they hear that story? If they are to hear the story it will not be by attending church, since they are unlikely to attend church. If they are to hear the story it will be because some neighbour, friend, co-worker, relative introduces them to part of the story and then the story draws them in.

We have a story to tell, a story of what Jesus means to us, a story of how the Holy Spirit has brought hope and meaning to our lives, a story of how the community of believers called the church has helped us live into the story of Jesus, a story that declares there is more to life than the consumerism which leads to all things becoming commodities. We don't need fancy words or special training, we simply need to have the courage to tell the story, the Holy Spirit will do the rest.

## *Aging and Dying: Common Human Experiences*

Frits de Lange, *Loving Later Life: An Ethics of Aging*, (Eerdmans, 2015).

Gilbert Meilaender, *Should We Live Forever?: The Ethical Ambiguities of Aging*, (Eerdmans, 2013).

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *A Long Letting Go: Meditations on Losing Someone You Love*, (Eerdmans, 2015).

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *A Faithful Farewell: Living Your Last Chapter with Love*, (Eerdmans, 2015).

The legal and political debate about the right to die has become a conversation around kitchen tables and at hospital bedsides throughout the country; these four titles belong in those conversations.

De Lange names a hard truth, human beings do not like the aging process. Quoting a bluntly stated but a commonly held view, “I am disgusted by the whole aging process” (64), de Lange names the 3 Rs of this ageism: repudiation, repugnance, and repulsion. In order to apply the second great commandment, “love you (elderly) neighbour as yourself”, which is the central call of the book, de Lange explores the question of how we might love our elderly selves. In order to love our elderly neighbour, we must love the God who made us as persons who age. Drawing on a host of resources and thinkers, de Lange rejects the individualism rooted in most aging theories, calling for a community of care which is marked by strong compassion, “not a moaning-with, as pity, commiseration, figures of regret, it is a struggling-with, an accompanying.” (129). Such a community of care arises from a deep understanding of what it means for a person to be loved by God regardless of their physical or mental ability.

*Loving Later Life* while worth reading is not an easy read. Reading chapters 3-5 first, before the theoretical argument laid out in chapters 1 and 2 might make sense.

Meilaender’s elegantly written book, asks why not get on the bandwagon which is seeking perpetual life? Why die at all? He compellingly notes the self-centeredness of such a pursuit, highlighting that nature itself is focused on keeping creatures (human, animal, insect) alive through the stage when they can reproduce and (sometimes) nurture the next generation, and then nature is uninterested in the preservation of life. Thus life is lived outward focused, concerned for the preservation of the next generation, not one’s own life.

In “Patience” (alone worth the price of the book), Meilaender highlights three things that might be lost if human beings did not die. 1. We would no longer recognize that our desires have limits; 2. The stories of our lives would lose meaning, for there would be no end or goal (telos); and 3. Life would lose its sense of being gifted. “It is patience that makes place in life for its accompanying virtue, gratitude. For without patience we can receive nothing as a gift, nothing that comes apart from our own effort and achievement.” (85-86).

The fact that human beings die is a gift for it opens the gates to the coming kingdom of the risen Christ, opens the gates to what we await resurrection life. And we wait for it with patience.

McEntyre’s two books are collections of 3 page meditations focused in the one case on the process of dying (the collection uses “I” language to refer to the one who is terminally ill, reminding all readers of their mortality) and in the other book for those who are walking with the dying. McEntyre writes from personal experience with grief and loss and from being a hospice volunteer. Spiritually wise, practical, each meditation ends with a prayer to ground the reader in the mystery of God. McEntyre’s repeated call to give the processes of death and grief the time needed, reminds readers of the need for quality palliative care which allows the dying and the grieving the time to do the holy work of saying “Good-bye.”

## *Reading About America: Reflecting on Canada*

Mark R. Amstutz, *Just Immigration: American Policy in Christian Perspective*, (Eerdmans, 2017)

Juan Francisco Martinez, *The Story of Latino Protestants in the United States*, (Eerdmans, 2018)

John Fea, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, (Eerdmans, 2018)

These titles focused on the US, provide Canadians an opportunity to reflect on ourselves, inviting some humility.

A new Canadian past-time is shaking our heads in amazement that President Trump was elected, asking how is it that so many “evangelicals” voted for him? Among the factors Fea notes, the most compelling is the role of fear. All the candidates agreed, the challenges facing America were so great it would take someone prepared to do anything to protect America. Donald Trump proved frequently that he was prepared to say anything and declared himself prepared to use all of America’s strength to protect the nation. The ballot box question for many voters became: who is capable of withstanding the forces threatening America? The answer: Donald Trump.

Fea offers a three-part antidote to the Trump: 1. Hope, not fear – Christians know God wins the victory in Jesus Christ who is even now King of kings and Lord of lords. God’s reign will come not by human hands but by God’s action, therefore we live in hope. 2. Humility, not power – the famous cartoon rings here – “We have met the enemy and they are partly right.” Neither we nor our opponents are completely right or completely wrong. Can we be humble enough to learn from our opponents? 3. History, not nostalgia – the way things were is not always the way they are remembered, the past may not have been as golden as it is remembered. History teaches humility, showing all human beings, including us, to be finite, fallible creatures. These three points are applicable north of the border as well. Fea’s book is a fast read, giving readers food for thought.

While reading the next two books, I went grocery shopping, ten Mexican seasonal farm workers were shopping in the store as well. For Canada, as well, immigration is a multi-faceted conversation

Amstutz outlines present US immigration policy, noting strengths and weaknesses; pointing out family re-unification is central to the policy, as opposed to Canada’s privileging of immigrants’ skills. He explores the challenge 11 million “illegal” immigrants pose to policy makers. Turning to examine how various Christian denominations have critiqued and sought to shape US immigration policy, Amstutz notes most denominations offer specific policy suggestions. For example, increasing the number of refugees allowed into the country annually, without placing those suggestions in their wider context. The lack of a wider context does not help Christians who sit in church pews Sunday by Sunday engage thoughtfully with the questions of immigration. A question: most refugees would prefer to remain in their homeland rather than fleeing, what role do citizens of the world have in ensuring the vulnerable do not have to flee?

65% of US Latinos were born in the US, this itself is a conversation changer. Martinez notes the intentional ways US Presbyterians brought the gospel to Latinos during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, establishing Spanish speaking congregations. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century however, Presbyterians were not prominent among Latino Protestants. The decline related, in part, to the failure of Presbyterians to adjust to the worship practices and ethos of Latino culture; Latinos felt unwelcome in the Presbyterian fold. A question: how willing are Euro-Canadian Presbyterians to give space for the worship practices of Presbyterians arriving in Canada from other places in the world?

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