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John and Charlotte Geddie sailed for the New Hebrides (Vanuatu)

175 years ago

by Peter Bush

In 1843, John Geddie, minister of Cavendish and New London Presbyterian congregations on Prince Edward Island, wrote a series of letters in the denominational newspaper regarding the call of the gospel to “go and tell”, highlighting the importance of overseas mission work. Geddie pushed further the following year, convincing the Presbytery of Prince Edward Island to overture the Synod of Nova Scotia (which covered PEI) to establish a Foreign Missions Committee, which the Synod did. In 1845, the Synod instructed the committee to choose a mission field to which to send a missionary.

The United Secession Church of Scotland had been interested in sending a missionary to the South Pacific, and that interest came to the attention of the team from the Synod of Nova Scotia, who took up the cause. But no one could be found to volunteer to be a missionary, so in September 1845 Geddie volunteered and was accepted.

John and Charlotte Geddie accompanied by Isaac and Ann Eliza Archibald (Isaac was a catechist) left Halifax on Nov. 30, 1846, on a journey that would take 20 months before their arrival in the New Hebrides archipelago (known today as Vanuatu). The Archibalds had been married for a month when they left Halifax. The Geddies and Archibalds were the first foreign missionaries sent by any church located in a British colony, and certainly the first Canadian Presbyterian missionaries. In preparation for going to Vanuatu, Geddie had learned printing,

building, plastering, and the rudiments of medicine from his father-in-law, a medical doctor. During the long voyage, Geddie read everything he could about Vanuatu and he and Isaac Archibald taught themselves the native language.

The experience of the Aneiteumese with people of European stock was not positive. The whalers and sandalwood traders had traded unfairly with the local inhabitants, had engaged in human trafficking by buying women from the island, and had used force to impose their will on the islanders. While the local population was a collection of tribal groups, each with their own chief and territory, they shared cultural practices, including the killing of infant girls and strangling widows to death at the funerals of their husbands. The early attenders at the worship gatherings led by Geddie and Archibald were largely women and children.

The team that landed at Anelgauhat, the main harbour, on Aneityum, the most southernly island in Vanuatu, on July 29, 1848, included the Geddies and Archibalds, along with the Powells, British missionaries who had been working in Samoa with the London Missionary Society. The original plan had been that the mission team would go to Efate, in the middle of the island group, with the capital city of Villa. But the unstable situation on Efate forced a change in plans. So the team was taken to Aneityum, the next island south, of Efate, which had never been part of the conversation about where the Geddies should go.

When *The John Williams*, the London Missionary Society's mission ship, returned to Aneityum in Sept. 1849, significant changes had taken place in the mission. Isaac Archibald had had an affair with an Indigenous woman, raising questions about whether the missionaries were different than the whalers and the sandalwood traders in their sexual practices. Geddie had asked Isaac Archibald to leave the Presbyterian mission. Archibald having no other means of financial support had taken employment with the sandalwood traders, further damaging the reputation of the mission. The Powells departed Aneityum when *The John Williams* sailed away, broken by discouragement and malaria. The Geddie's were now alone in the mission, and they would remain alone for the next three years.

As the third anniversary of the Geddie's arrival passed in July 1851, things started to turn. The Archibalds, whose continuing presence on Aneityum was a distraction, relocated to Australia. But more importantly, the ripples of Geddie's successful prevention of a woman's strangulation in 1850 started to bring a change in attitude towards the mission. A few of the chiefs started to listen to Geddie's preaching, which made church attendance more acceptable on the island. Thus by May 1852 when *The John Williams* again visited Aneityum the tone was completely different. The sandalwood company was in decline and the aggressive actions of the company's agents would soon no longer be a factor on the island. Further, the congregation of Jesus' followers was growing.

That year's visit by *The John Williams* brought John and Jessie Inglis, from the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland who already had a decade of missionary experience among the Maori of New Zealand. This addition to the team could not have come at a better time as Geddie was almost broken by malaria and workload. More importantly the arrival of the mission ship meant Geddie had others to talk to about the development of the mission. Those conversations led to the establishment of the first church on the island. Up until this point there had been a

weekly gathering of worshippers, but no one had been baptized and communion had not been celebrated. Now both of those took place as fifteen people were baptized and in a service conducted in Aneiteumese, Samoan, and English communion was celebrated. Geddie claimed that this was the first official church among the Oceanic Papuan people group. In a letter home to Nova Scotia, he went on to say, "I trust...that your prayers for [the church's] prosperity and increase will be constantly presented on its behalf."

With an indigenous church established Geddie followed the missiological thinking of Henry Venn, the British Anglican mission theorist. Venn postulated the goal of the missionaries was as quickly as possible to nurture into being an indigenous church that was self-governing (that is, one where local leaders made decisions regarding the life of the church, using decision making methods that were consistent with the cultural practice), self-propagating (that is, one where indigenous church members did the evangelism not the missionaries, and the gospel was thus proclaimed in the cultural idiom of the local context), and self-sufficient (that is, able to financially support the congregations that were being started and their ministry). This approach provided for the rapid development of a local Indigenous church led by Indigenous people, thereby seeking to limit the impact of the missionaries' home culture on the Indigenous church. Central to this process was the development of a financial arrangement that worked for Indigenous church. The local church developed a financial model that worked for them, regardless of what the missionaries were receiving from the mission board of their home denomination.

As these self-governing congregations arose across Aneityum, Geddie recognized that these newly appointed church leaders were displacing the local community chiefs. The church leaders were selected by the local congregation and therefore were at times more trusted by the local community than were the chiefs. Geddie worked with the chiefs to create a island-wide council of

chiefs, who together would make decisions for the whole island. In this way the respect for the chiefs was maintained, even as their role evolved. While such interference in the evolution of the island's decision-making can be questioned, Geddie's awareness of the need to preserve the chief's respect demonstrates a sophisticated analysis of the island's governance practices.

Geddie spent the last years of his ministry on Aneityum translating the Bible into Aneiteumese. He had completed the New Testament at the time of his death and had begun work on the Old Testament. Along with the translation work came the publication of other books and the development of schools. Having the Bible in the language of the people made little sense if many people could not read.

When John and Charlotte Geddie retired from ministry on Aneityum in 1872 after 24 years of ministry, it was said that when they arrived there were no Christians on the island, and when they left there was no one who was not a follower of Jesus. Even allowing for the exaggeration in the comment, the words bear witness to the influence of the Geddies' ministry for the good of the reign of God.

The Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu became an autonomous denomination in 1948, the 100th anniversary of the Geddies' arrival. The denomination presently has about 78,000 members, representing 30% of the total population of Vanuatu. Two hundred clergy serve 400 to 450 congregations, many of which gather for worship in members' homes.

A Note about regarding Climate Change and Vanuatu

For Small Island Developing States (SIDS) like Vanuatu, climate change is the most significant single threat to sustainable development. A total of ten island states are among the 15 countries with the highest disaster risk. Their risk profile is increasingly also determined by sea-level rise. The country with the highest risk of disaster worldwide is Vanuatu.

Without addressing climate change, sustainable development in SIDS cannot be achieved. One direct consequence of climate change is the increase in extreme weather events, which increasingly destroys crops and thus, has an adverse impact on many people's livelihood. Shortages in food lead cause sharp increases in prices leading to hunger and eventually to humanitarian crisis. Cyclone Pam, which hit Vanuatu in 2015 has clearly demonstrated this, affecting 64% of the economy and 60% of the population as well as destroying 96% of food crops. (PWS&D responded to the relief efforts in Vanuatu.) Rising ocean temperatures,

resulting from climate change, will have a big impact on marine fisheries by changing habitat temperatures which will significantly influence fish metabolism, growth, reproduction and distribution. Fishery being one of the most important sources of food for many SIDS is thus threatened. Other impacts that Vanuatu along with other SIDS are experiencing already, include sea-level rise, coastal erosion and ocean acidification. These developments are not only a risk to food security but also to tourism, which is for many SIDS the most significant sector of their economy. Thus, rising sea levels threaten the economies and the eradication of poverty, frustrating the countries' efforts to achieve sustainable development.

Given The Presbyterian Church in Canada's historical connection with Vanuatu, might Canadian Presbyterians being called to partner with the church in Vanuatu as they face the challenges of being the highest disaster risk nation in the world.

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Challenging the Practices in The Indian Residential School System: Whistleblowers within The Presbyterian Church in Canada

By Peter Bush

(A WARNING ABOUT CONTENT: This short piece discusses what took place in some Indian Residential Schools operated by The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The incidents cited may be difficult for some readers. Please reach out for help if you find the discussion triggers anxiety.)

Dr. Peter Bryce, raised in a Scots Presbyterian home, has been rightly hailed for his work in exposing what was happening in the Indian Residential Schools. In 1904, Bryce was appointed chief medical officer for both the federal government's Department of the Interior and for the Indian Affairs department. In that capacity he did his 1907, Report on The Indian Schools of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories. This was a 25-page epidemiological study of the schools. After his forced retirement from his role in the two government departments *The Story of A National Crime* was published in 1922. The sub-title of the 18-page booklet is "An Appeal for Justice to the Indians of Canada", who are described on the title page as "The Wards of the Nation; Our Allies in the Revolutionary War; Our Brothers-in-Arms in the Great War." (Bryce's recognition to role of Indigenous soldiers in World War was uncommon among settlers.) The attention his work has earned as a result of Dr. Cindy Blackstock telling his story is well deserved. This short article in no way seeks to diminish the attention he has received. Instead, it seeks to point out that a variety of sources over many years provided leaders within The Presbyterian Church in Canada with evidence that were problems in the Residential Schools operated by the church.

The people named in this article are almost all settlers who worked in the schools. They are not innocent, for they were part of a system that harmed children. Some of those named saw children being abused by other staff members

and sought to bring those actions to the attention of leaders of the Women's Missionary Society and to the responsible mission board. Others named in this brief article recognized that the system itself was failing and called for changes in policies. Some of these individuals disobeyed both church and government officials seeking to bring change to the schools. Finally, some parents voiced their concerns about the treatment their children were receiving to local Presbyterian clergy who reported these accounts to church leaders. Again, no claim of innocence is being made on behalf of the staff in the schools. However, hearing the stories of those who reported what they saw and who sought to resist adds depth to the story.

All staff – teachers, principals, matrons and their staff – along with church officials were concerned about how quickly disease could sweep through a school. As Bryce's 1907 report indicated, the schools were overcrowded, the fault of the federal government in not providing adequate funding so that students had sufficient space, and so that the schools could be properly ventilated. That same report indicated the schools frequently were poorly cleaned and some basic hygiene practices were being overlooked. These failings were the responsibility of the church authorities, that being the principal and the school's matron.

Battles over insufficient resources to operate the schools were constant. In 1952, Mr. N. M. Rusaw, principal at the Birtle Residential School wrote to the WMS-WD responding to a demand that he find ways to cut costs, *I can't see how we can cut the food bills down with the number of children we have at present. The [parents] have been complaining to the agent [the Federal Government's official on the Birdtail Reserve] that their children have not been getting sufficient. Personally, I agree that the children have not had any too much.*

Rusaw was caught in a struggle that had been going on for years as the Federal Government underfunded the schools. The astute Principal of Birtle School, W. W. McLaren, wrote that the government did “not propose to increase the expenditure on Indian work – they rather think that too much is expended for the work done.” By the same token, the church was not prepared to spend any additional funds on the schools.

The philosophy at work in the Indian Affairs Branch of the Federal Government was that most valuable things Indigenous children could learn in the schools was basic hygiene and simple farming techniques. Government officials worried that if students were in class full days they would not learn these things. The government’s approach, of only half days in the classroom, condemned Indigenous children to never achieve their academic potential. Historian J. R. Miller has said that with the half-day education model “there was always a ‘buckskin ceiling’ over the heads of the Indigenous children.” Few students got beyond grade 6 before they became too old to attend school. The Rev. R. B. Heron, former principal of the Regina Industrial School, raised this problem in 1923 in a presentation he made to the Presbytery of Regina. He argued it was not just about teaching the students hygiene and farming techniques. Students were “kept out at work that produces revenue for the School”, thus the students were cheap labour for the “farms and gardens and laundries and bake-shops and kitchens in connection” with the schools.

Heron told a funny story illustrating the poor quality education students received. “Very few” of the students upon graduation “are capable of interpreting Cree into English, or vice versa.”

A story is told of a clergyperson who attempted to preach to an Indigenous congregation through an Interpreter, from the text (Matt. 14:27), “It is I, be not afraid,” when that came to the ears of the congregation in their own

language, it was “Hit him in the eye, don’t be afraid.”

Such struggles in interpretation revealed why it was important to get the tools of translation into the classroom.

R. Webb, Principal of Birtle School 1942-1945, challenged the model of education that had students in Residential School only half-days. Arguing that children in grade 4 and above “are not learning anything” when they spent half days in the laundry, mending clothes, or doing farm chores. Webb implemented full-day classroom education for all students in grade 4 and above. His successor at Birtle, N. M. Rusaw, did the same. A number of graduates from the Birtle School went on to trades school and university education.

Miss Barbara Dean taught at Cecilia Jeffrey School in 1946 and quickly realized if she was going to teach effectively she would have “to have respect for Indian culture.” To that end she tried to obtain dictionaries in Sioux, Cree, and Saulteaux (the three languages spoken at Birtle School. She also asked for a book in Indigenous songs and ceremonial dances. The WMS-WD had no such resources, and the Indian Affairs Branch was able to provide only a Sioux-English dictionary. The WMS-WD lacking such resources indicates that in seeking to support and nurture Indigenous language and culture in her students Dean was challenging the assimilationist design of the schools. She brought into sharp focus the church’s de facto endorsement of the elimination of indigenous languages and cultural practices.

Abusive disciplinary practices were reported to the church leadership, but little was done to hold the guilty to account. In the fall of 1943, Miss Ross arrived at CJ School as a teacher. The level of discipline exercised by the principal, the Rev. Pitts, was so extreme that Ross travelled to Toronto to tell her story to the Executive of the WMS-WD face-to-face. Notes from the meeting report:

...one time when the children were being strapped...from the noise it seemed as if the

girls were being knocked against the wall....The door opened and it seemed as though someone tumbled out. Mr. Pitts called out "You dirty, filthy" but Miss Ross did not catch the last word. "Spit it out in the hall, you dirty, lying rats," he concluded. On another occasion Mr. Pitts had called the children in Miss Ross' classroom "You dirty, lying sneaks."

In the meeting with the WMS-WD Executive Ross reported a boy had been so badly beaten by Pitts that the nurse had to care for the young man. The Executive took Ross' concerns under advisement, but the minutes of this meeting and subsequent Executive meetings show little concern regarding Pitts' disciplinary style or vocabulary. Ross left the school because she could no longer work in that environment. She had tried to blow the whistle on the wrong behaviour but nothing changed. The WMS-WD knew there was a problem but did nothing.

Sexual abuse took place in the schools. At Cecilia Jeffrey School in 1910-1911, a number of the female students told the assistant matron that the principal had had them "but their hands under his clothing and play with his breasts." Also the principal "was in the habit of kissing the old girls." The former staff member who brought these accusations was interviewed by the Rev. R. P. Mackay, Secretary for the Board of Foreign Missions. Mackay reported "some things even more unpleasant" to the board, but again nothing was done to hold this principal to account or to stop his inappropriate actions. At the Round Lake School in 1912, a boy was standing naked in the shower room close to a window. The principal saw and took hold of the naked boy and dragged him into a room where the principal's wife was sitting. To further humiliate the boy was dragged into another room where a female teacher and female students were gathered. The boy in resisting being exposed fell to the floor with the principal on top of him. The female teacher suggested the principal get the boy something with which to cover himself. She reported this incident to the

church leadership in Toronto but nothing was done about it.

Racism was experienced. Miss Mary Begg was the first Indigenous person hired as a teacher in a Presbyterian Residential School. It was 1939. Begg taught craft skills to students at the Birtle School. However, the school setting was so toxic that Begg resigned in March 1940, leaving before the end of the school year. The only reason this story is known at all is that Miss Kathleen Stewart, a teacher at Birtle, had made a connection with Mary Begg. As the only teacher to make a connection, Stewart wrote, "I think it breaks [Mary Begg's] heart to be in such a disgusting situation. I do not think she wants to go, but would rather die than be misunderstood." It has not been possible to piece together what took place, but clearly there had been a challenge to Mary Begg's reputation rooted in the racist understandings of the staff.

Brutal physical discipline, sexual abuse, overt racism, and poor-quality education were all features of the Indian Residential Schools operated by The Presbyterian Church in Canada. These failures were reported to church leadership, but rarely did the leaders of the church do anything to correct the problems or to hold the perpetrators to account. The structures of the church knew about the problems, they had ample evidence of the actions and the racist attitudes of specific teachers and principals. They also had evidence that the entire system was deeply flawed. Yet they were unwilling to confront either challenge, on the one hand fearing that no one would replace the staff who were removed, and on the other hand concerned that severe criticism of the system would mean the operation of the schools would be taken out of their hands. In fact, there inaction proved they were more concerned about the denomination than they were about the children who had been placed in their care.

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HISTORICAL VIGNETTE

Missionary Life Among the Cannibals: Being the Life of the Rev. John Geddie was written by George Patterson based largely on John Geddie's journal and letters to his contacts in the Maritimes. A significant amount of Geddie's ministry was involved with protecting women from the practice of strangulation which was prevalent on Anetiyum. When he arrived, Geddie knew that widows were commonly strangled to death at the funerals of their husbands. But as Charlotte and John lived on the island, they discovered the practice was much more frequent. If a child died, the child's mother might be strangled to death, if an important man in the community died, not only his wife but also his sisters might be strangled. The practice impacted the demographic mix of the island, it was estimated in 1848 when the Geddies arrived that there were sixty females for every hundred males on the island.

The following is taken from Geddie's journal from Aug. 23, 1851, shortly after having marked the third anniversary of their arrival on Anetiyum. Patterson argues that the fourth year of the Geddie's ministry, 1851-1852, "probably was the most important in his career."

An incident of an exciting nature has just taken place. The son of the chief, who is one of my scholars, came in haste to my house two days ago, to tell me that a young child in the family was very ill, and that his father had declared his intention of strangling the mother in the event of the child's death. I went immediately in search of the old man, and found him at work in his taro plantation. I asked him if the report of the boy was true, and he answered in the affirmative. I spoke to him of the wickedness of his intention, and reminded him of the many promises he had made to me, to discourage the horrid practice of strangling women. He endeavoured with great warmth to vindicate himself, and blamed the mother for the sickness of the child...Finding that it was vain to reason with him, and that we were both likely to become excited on such a subject. I left him abruptly. I went at once to the house where the woman was, and told her to follow me. She hesitated, from fear of her husband; but I insisted, as also did her son and a few indigenous people who were with me. [The woman and the sick child were moved to the Geddies home.] On our way home, we saw the old chief running after us, and calling out to his wife to return. We hastened our pace, and were inside of my yard before he overtook us. He was much enraged when he arrived, and wished his wife to go back to his house, but I would not consent to this. The woman remained two days with us before the child died, and during this time Nohoat [the chief] came often to see them both – he was much attached to his child. After the child died, he showed great distress. He seized the lifeless corpse, pressed to his breast, rolled himself on the ground, and cried out in a most affecting manner. At his own request, the child was buried instead of being cast into the sea, according to the old custom....The mother was spared.

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