



Presbyterian History

A Newsletter of the Committee on History
The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Volume 66 #2

Fall 2022

A Diversity of Models of Congregational Ministry used by Canadian Presbyterians

by Peter Bush, Fergus, Ontario

Presbyterians in Canada have employed a variety of ministry models over the 250 years they have been part of the Canadian landscape.

The model of congregational ministry of a minister called to a single congregation to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in that place and to serve the people of that parish on a full-time basis is one that has been imported from Scotland. A variety of factors in the Canadian context have made that model problematic to implement universally.

First, there were not enough clergy to serve all the communities of Presbyterians who desired to have worship. Thus the first clergy to arrive in Canada commonly had two or three congregations that they preached to and served. What we today would call the multipoint charge or would use the vocabulary of yoked congregations.

Second, the fact of Canadian geography meant that the communities of Presbyterians desiring worship were spread much more thinly in Canada than in Scotland and so a number of Presbyterian congregations only had a minister preach in their pulpits 3 or 4 times a year. The Rev. James Drummond MacGregor (1759-1830) would spend May through early September each travelling from his home parish in the Pictou area of Nova Scotia to Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton Island preaching to congregations who had not had a minister in their pulpits since the previous summer, and he would do the baptisms that had been waiting since his last visit. Meanwhile in his home congregations, elders would lead worship while MacGregor was travelling.

Third, the newly arrived settlers in Pictou County, Cape Breton, and other locations had limited financial resources, what they did have a great deal of was land. The way clergy were remunerated was a combination of stipend, the provision of a manse, and the provision of a glebe. The glebe was an idea borrowed from Scotland where clergy were provided with land on which to pasture their horse, and to grow enough crop to feed the horse through the winter. In Canada, this idea was expanded on as the glebe became a source of food and firewood for the minister's family. (This summer (2022), I had the chance to visit the home of the Rev. Thomas McCulloch (1776-1843), an important early Presbyterian minister in Pictou, NS. One of the things I noted was the significant amount of land around the McCulloch House which would have been crop land. The presence of a barn on the property re-enforced that conclusion.) Thus, clergy were bi-vocational, as at the time were many others in "professional" occupations, being a minister and a farmer. Farming was "the side-hustle" that made ministry possible. Additional practices were adopted in the Canadian context to provide spiritual support to Presbyterians.

Thomas McCulloch spearheaded the development of an education system in Pictou County whose first purpose was to train Canadian clergy. Few ministers from Scotland were prepared to leave Scotland and travel to the unknown challenges of Canada, yet the demand for clergy was ever increasing. (The education system that pro-

duced Canadian teachers and doctors, etc.) Canadian trained clergy were likely to stay in Canada to do their ministry, and they understood the Canadian context and evolving Canadian culture. Thus, the graduates of the seminary McCulloch led were already enculturated into the context with a nascent ministry framework shaped by the Canadian context. Having clergy with an innate understanding of the cultural context where they serve is an important part of building missional communities of faith.

Presbyterians in Cape Breton in particular, and in other locations as well, adapted the Long Communion or “Holy Fairs”

from Scotland to the Canadian context. The Long Communion was a five or six-day retreat, drawing together people from a number of congregations in a region. In the six-day format, the Wednesday

was arrival day and the setting up of tents and cooking facilities, and, in the evening, there was preaching by various ministers, as welcome and introduction to the event. Thursday was The Day of the Elders, when as many as fifteen elders would preach. The elders had been given a Bible passage the previous fall to reflect on and prepare to speak about, and now after a winter of reflection they spoke what the Spirit had guided them to say. Friday was a day of Penitence, of sombre reflection on one’s actions, words, and attitudes, in the face of a God of holiness. On Saturday, elders visited those attending for spiritual conversation and the distribution of Communion Tokens. Then Sunday, the high point in the proceedings, was communion. The sermon spoke of God’s grace in Jesus Christ and then was the communion celebration. In sittings of thirty or forty people (following the number on their token) those attending came forward to sit at the table and have communion at the table of the Lord. Often there would be 600 people at such retreats meaning there would be fifteen or more sittings at the table. The Communion celebration took a long time, rejoicing the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

*The graduates of the seminary
McCulloch led were already
enculturated into the context with a
nascent ministry framework shaped
by the Canadian context.*

The Monday was the day of thanksgiving and the tent city was taken down and people returned home until the next year. Such an experience fed the spiritual lives of participants for months, and the elders having received the Bible passage for the following year had something to chew on through the cold winter.

As Presbyterians moved into northern Ontario and on into the West in the 1870’s through 1910’s, many of the challenges that faced the early Presbyterian arrivals in the Maritimes were again evident: the shortage of clergy, the vast geography, and limited resources. But by the late 19th century

The Presbyterian Church in Canada had some structural pieces in place to support these small gatherings of people who desired to worship as communities of faith together. There were now more theological colleges,

including some on the Prairies, and the students from the colleges spent 6 months in class and 6 months in a student mission charge. The leadership of Manitoba College, Winnipeg, recognized that during the winter student mission charges were without students to serve them, for the students were in classes. The college reversed its academic year, students went to school in the summer and were available for student mission charges in the winter. Not only were students being enculturated to Prairie life, the college was willing to flip its entire year to fit the needs of Prairie congregations.

The 1897 General Assembly was challenged to produce a worship book to support those “debarred by circumstances from Church services”, and 1900 Aids for Social Worship: Being Short Services of Prayer and Praise for the use of Christians was adopted by the Assembly and produced for use. Social Worship was distinct from Family Worship, which took place inside the home. The book was for the use of those “who desire to unite in the worship of God.” The preface in part read, “The design of this Manual is to furnish aids to social worship...It may be found helpful to

Pioneer-settlers, Explorers, Miners, Prospectors, Mounted Police, Volunteers on Military Duty, Travellers by land and sea, Visitors to summer resorts, and other persons.” The assumption being no minister was available to lead worship for the gathered community in these contexts. The model order of worship assumed there would be an “Address or Sermon” including the following, “In the event of there being no person present to address the congregation, or no sermon to be read, the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes may be introduced.” This sentence is revealing in two ways, the expectation that someone in a group of Christians would be able to present a sermon. Second, that collections of written sermons existed and these printed sermon collections were possible material to be used in such contexts. The production of the worship book was clear permission to lay people to do what was necessary so worship could take place for their community of faith.

A parallel project was initiated in the early 1910’s in southern Alberta. As record players became more common, and businesses began offering ordinary citizens the opportunity to record their own voices on records, a group of Presbyterian ministers in Calgary would on a rotating basis record sermons on Tuesdays and ship the records to rural and small town Presbyterian congregations across southern Alberta. The records would arrive in mail boxes on Thursday or Friday and would be played on Sunday in worship. The members of the congregation would lead and engage in singing and prayers, and at the sermon time play the record they had been sent for that week. (The conversations presently taking place about the use of technology to support small, rural congregations is not new.) The community of faith still gathered, they incarnational heart of the church remained alive even as the preacher was not present with them.

A radio station in Edmonton carried an on-air Sunday School. It began during the Spanish Flu crisis of 1919, but was continued because children

and youth at distance from one another were eager to engage with such a program. It was a remote learning Sunday School, which had the challenges of not being together in-person but was a way of addressing the needs of Sunday Schools where there were only 2 or 3 children.

The worship book, the sermons on vinyl, and the radio Sunday School, all told small and isolated congregations that there were ways to be church, there were ways to maintain vibrant communities of faith, without full-time paid clergy and other religious professionals. These models gave lay leaders the permission and the authority

to gather people together and become worshipping communities in whatever town, village, or rural area they lived. The effort put into providing these contexts with the resources they needed, told the people living in such

The production of the worship book was clear permission to lay people to do what was necessary so worship could take place for their community of faith.

rural and isolated contexts that they were important.

Circuit Riding was used in the Peace River Country of Alberta and also in northern British Columbia in the 1910’s. During the summer months when the river was navigable, the Rev. T. T. MacGregor would buy lumber, build a boat and travel down river. He would stop in at the farms and hamlets along with way and conduct worship services, provide pastoral care and spiritual direction and then be on his way to the next house or hamlet. If he arrived on a Tuesday, then Tuesday was the day for worship. Upon arrival in Fort Vermillion, MacGregor would sell the boat, buy a ticket on the steamer that would take him back up-river to Peace River. There he would buy more lumber, build a boat and do it all over again. In the winter he did the circuit on skis. The physical demands of this type of ministry are obvious. But behind the physical demands was a willingness on the part of both the Rev. MacGregor and the members of the house churches to worship on days other than Sunday. The opportunity to worship was more important than the day of the week or the time when worship took place.

The minister serving the Pouce Coupe charge, northern British Columbia, spent two months in Pouce Coupe and then on horseback did a two-month circuit first to Fort St. John and then on to more isolated communities. At the end of the two months the missionary was back in Pouce Coupe where after two months of ministry would be back on the two-month circuit. Again, this was physically demanding, but for the purposes of this article the thing to be noticed: worship was not always on Sunday, these communities of faith became accustomed to worshipping on other days when the minister was present in the community.

Through the first half of the 20th century catechists were part of the way in which the ministry needs of congregations within The Presbyterian Church in Canada were addressed. Catechists were lay people who had some theological training, often a year or two at a Bible College. They were appointed by Presbyteries to serve congregations by preaching, doing pastoral care and spiritual direction, being a presence in the community, doing everything a minister would do except they could not administer the sacraments, nor could they moderate (chair) the Session. Knox Presbyterian Church in Winnipegosis, Manitoba had a catechist for many years in the 1940's and 1950's. The practice of using catechists who have been formally appointed by presbyteries has been in a state of decline in the church over the last forty years. Catechists were often people who had deep roots in the communities that they served and were able to do their ministry bi-vocationally. These links allowed the catechists to become richly incarnated in the community living out the gospel as part of the community. A variation on the catechist model is starting to appear as some congregations have found a lay preacher in their community who has become the regular preacher in their pulpit, while the individual is also a teacher, or farmer, or business person.

One of the challenges faced by all these alternative approaches is where did they fit in the

structures of the denomination. The model of congregation, session (elders), and minister within a presbyterial system is deeply rooted in the DNA of the denomination. The assumption from the 1700's through until the early 1900's was that the fledgling mission fields of a handful of people gathering for worship would grow and evolve into congregations with sessions who would go through the formal process of calling a minister and the experiments used in the start up of the community of faith would be regularized as the congregation matured reaching the appropriate benchmarks. By the 1910's (and even earlier in some situations) it was clear to denominational

*Worship was not always on Sunday,
these communities of faith
became accustomed to worshipping on
other days of the week when the
minister was present in the community.*

leaders that some, if not many, of the mission fields would never reach the place of becoming regular congregations. What to do about this was a live question that, as far as I have been

able to find, never found formal answer at the denominational level. Presbyteries were left to develop ways of nurturing and supporting these communities of faith. A number of presbyteries adopted the term "preaching point" to indicate a community of faith without a settled pastor and at times even without a Session.

Into the second half of the 20th century, as congregational decline became the ethos in which the denomination existed, the conversation about irregular patterns of congregational ministry were no longer about how to encourage congregations whose growth had stalled before having a Session and called minister. Instead, the conversation has turned to how to support communities of faith that once had called ministers and robust Sessions, but that was no longer the case. And again the patterns of support adopted have varied from presbytery to presbytery.

Some presbyteries developed the practice of Interim Moderators being named to such congregations on the understanding that they would serve as Interim Moderator for a three-year term, which could be renewed if both the minister and the congregation were in favour of such an extension.

These longer-term Interim Moderatorships allowed deep pastoral relationships to be built between the leadership of the congregation and the Interim Moderator. Relationships which provided congregations with stability in the governance of the church, and a confidence that there would be someone to walk with them through difficult pastoral moments. As well, Interim Moderators in these contexts were able to engage elders and other congregational leaders in processes of thinking about future models of ministry from a place of mutual trust. presbyteries who developed these patterns of longer-term Interim Moderatorships found that generally they were helpful for congregations. Presbyteries have learned that deploying gifted Interim Moderators to these faith communities helps their presbytery as less time was needed to respond to concerns.

Other presbyteries committed to training local leaders to leader worship, preach and do pastoral care. These leaders were provided with resources, training, and on-going support. Teams of four or five lay people worked together as worship leaders and preachers sharing the preaching and worship leading responsibilities. In the 1980's such teams were being created in northern Manitoba and in the early 2000's Cape Breton Presbytery established two teams that preached in congregations that were vacant. In some of these contexts, congregational leadership teams (elders and others) met monthly without an Interim Moderator. The Interim Moderator was part of the Session meetings which may have taken place every three months, meeting to ratify what had been decided by the leadership group in their meetings. Presbyteries that adopted this approach found the upfront work, which was significant, paid off in the end as communities of faith become sustainable, as did the work of Interim Moderators and presbyteries.

The freedom to design patterns of ministry that work at the local level has been central to The Presbyterian Church in Canada's experience at its best when starting new faith communities/congregations, that same freedom would serve the church well as it adapts to the needs of congregations in the face of church decline.

Presbyteries also began to train elders to conduct the sacraments, building on the permissions given by the General Assembly. In training elders to do communion, in particular, congregations have been freed to celebrate the sacrament on a timetable that works for them, and not being limited by the availability of a minister. Further this has taken pressure off Interim Moderators who previously needed to be away from their home congregation to lead communion.

The category of "preaching point", which is a highly flexible category, has allowed presbyteries to experiment with a variety of ministry models, discovering which work in which contexts and to

be able to adjust as needed. The freedom to design patterns of ministry that work at the local level has been central to The Presbyterian Church in Canada's experience at its best when starting new faith communities/con-

gregations, that same freedom would serve the church well as it adapts to the needs of congregations in the face of church decline.

The early Anglican missiologist, the Rev. Henry Venn, argued that churches needed to be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating (that is, drawing new people into the faith community). Canadian Presbyterians are good at the governing part; the challenges are the second and third. But in building models of ministry that are financially sustainable – self-supporting, we may just discover new energy, creativity, and passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ which will draw people into the community of faith. That hope lay behind each of the models discussed in this article. The congregations and presbyteries of The Presbyterian Church in Canada have the tools and the examples they need to find ways in their context to build self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating congregations.

* * * * *

Historical Vignette

From 1972 Acts and Proceedings a statement of the purposes and priorities of the Administrative Council (the predecessor to the Assembly Council), the following is excerpted from Acts and Proceedings 1972, p. 444-445.

Although the statement is for the guidance of the Council itself it was considered proper to present it to the church. It is as follows:

“Our starting point is the statement – *Jesus Christ is Lord*. This statement to have meaning must be understood in the light of Holy Scripture.

First, Jesus Christ is Lord needs to be understood as a historical fact, on the strength of Christ’s own words, after His resurrection, and before His ascension. “All power is given unto Me in Heaven and on earth”. Therefore we make bold to claim that Jesus Christ is Lord, and will be Lord, whether people acknowledge His Lordship or not.

Secondly, His Lordship must become a personal reality in the lives of individuals, before it can have any meaning for them. This Lordship means that my life is surrendered to Him and His will.

Thirdly, Christ’s Lordship in my life involves a corporate responsibility, which means that I am a member of His body which is the Church. According to the gifts which He has given we are to function together with other members of His body, Jesus Christ being the head.

There followed two sections:

JESUS CHRIST COMMISSIONS HIS DISCIPLES TO BE HIS WITNESSES

JESUS CHRIST PROMISES HIS PRESENCE TO US THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Then was a 7-point statement:

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS STATEMENT FOR THE LIFE OF THE COUNCIL

1. *Obedience*. The Council’s decisions are to be made as responses to the will of God as we understand it, even if these decisions may sometimes be unpopular with some of the Church’s membership.
2. *Risk*....It is the duty of the Council to examine requests carefully, and to be prepared to invest in programmes which are in accordance with the Gospel.
3. *Discipline*. As we place our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord, we still are under obligation to plan for the future....
4. *Setting Goals*. The essential task of the Council, along with the whole Church is missional....the essential need is to serve the Church and enable the Church to fulfill its calling. It is therefore expedient that the Council define its own mission goals in such areas as poverty, international affairs, human rights, evangelism, social action, etc.
5. *The Whole Church of Jesus Christ*. God’s mission is not a Presbyterian activity only....we must ally ourselves with other church and with the things God is doing in the world outside the institutional Church.
6. *Structure*. Our allegiance is to Christ, not our own machinery. Structures and procedures are to be modified as required in order to achieve our goals.
7. *Evaluation*. The Council will find it necessary from time to time to...evaluate its performance...

* * * * *

BOOKS RECEIVED BY THE EDITOR

The following titles have been received by the editor.

Margaret Bendroth, *The Spiritual Practice of Remembering*, (Eerdmans, 2013)

Kathleen Cahalan and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, eds., *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons*, (Eerdmans, 2017)

D. A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, (Eerdmans, 2016)

Mark Galli, *Karl Barth: An Introductory Biography for Evangelicals*, (Eerdmans, 2017)

William Greenway, *For the Love of All Creatures: The Story of Grace in Genesis*, (Eerdmans, 2015)

Darrell Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology, The Gospel and Our Culture Series*, (Eerdmans, 2015)

John Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*, (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2008)

Gordon Heath, ed., *Canadian Churches and the First World War*, McMaster General Studies Series, (Pickwick Publications, 2014)

George Hunsberger, *The Story that Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision*, (Eerdmans, 2015)

Sandra King, *The 1857 Hamilton Ontario Revival: An Exploration of the Origins of the Layman's Revival and the Second Great Awakening*, McMaster General Studies Series, Pickwick Publications, 2015)

George Marsden, *Religion and American Culture: A Brief History*, (Eerdmans, 2018)

Joseph Small, *Flawed Church, Faithful God: A Reformed Ecclesiology for the Real World*, (Eerdmans, 2018)

Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons*, (Eerdmans, 2018)