



## Presbyterian History

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

Volume 63, Number 2

Fall 2019

# *Biafra and The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1966-1970*

by Peter Bush

This article suggests Africa changed The Presbyterian Church in Canada in the second half of the twentieth century, using as an example the Nigerian civil war, alternatively known as the Biafran crisis. The Presbyterian Church in Canada was the only Canadian denomination with missionaries in Nigeria at the time of the conflict, therefore Presbyterians were at the center of the action in Canada as churches responded to the crisis. Canadian Presbyterians went to Nigeria in 1954 through joint ventures with the Church of Scotland.

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious federation. The north is predominantly Hausa/Fulani and Muslim; the eastern part Ibo (Igbo) and Christian; and Western Nigeria largely Yoruba. The central part of the country, where Lagos is located, is a mixture of ethnicities. Eastern Nigeria (Biafra) was, in the 1960's, the second most Christianized part of the continent; both Presbyterian and Catholic missionaries being active in the area for over a century. The majority of Nigeria's doctors, lawyers, teachers, and civil servants were Ibo. The positions of influence Ibos held throughout Nigeria, including in the northern Hausa/Fulani lands created tensions. Additionally, the discovery of oil in eastern Nigeria in 1958 and the economic development that accompanied it, caused some to believe that the Ibo were benefitting unfairly from the wealth that was beginning to come to Nigeria.

Beginning in January 1966, a series of military coups resulted in General Gowon being the military

leader of Federal Nigeria. Massacres of Ibos occurred in northern Nigeria, and Hausas living in eastern Nigeria were killed. Gowon and the Federal Military Government sought to develop a unifying constitutional framework. The centralizing approach was consistently rejected by Lieutenant-Colonel Ojukwu, Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria. On May 30, 1967 Biafra declared independence and the civil war began.

Canadians were aware of events in Nigeria, and a number of prominent persons had personal connections with Nigerians. The House of Commons Standing Committee on External Affairs held hearings. On March 14, 1968 the Rev. E. H. Johnson, Secretary for Overseas Missions, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, appeared before the committee as an expert witness. A frequent visitor to Nigeria, Johnson was familiar with political, educational, and religious leaders there. In fact, since June 1967 Johnson and, recently returned Presbyterian missionary, The Rev. Walter McLean, had been warning the External Affairs Department in Ottawa that civil war was brewing in Nigeria.

During his March 1968 appearance before the standing committee Johnson reported on observations from his January trip to Biafra and Lagos. He said, "These people are carrying on and, in spite of the war, they have managed to grow enough food....they should be able to carry on in terms of normal food supplies." Johnson was not overly worried about food and medical supplies getting into

Biafra, he was focused on finding a way to end the war.

By the summer of 1968, the story had changed. The food crisis in Biafra was acute. An estimated 6,000 people, primarily children, were dying each day in Biafra. There were predictions the death rate would rise to 10,000 a day by November. Children were not getting enough protein and were suffering from kwashiorkor. Suddenly the world was watching in fascinated horror.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) tried to get food aid into Biafra; but ran into roadblocks on all sides. The Nigerians wanted to inspect all trucks before they crossed from federal Nigeria into Biafra to ensure only food, and no arms, were on the vehicles. The Biafran government worried if they opened their defenses to allow trucks to bring in food aid, the Nigerian army would find a way to slip through the Biafran defenses. Trucking the aid was not an option. The Red Cross sought to fly food aid into Biafra, but the Nigerian federal government controlled the air space and threatened to shoot down any planes seeking to land inside Biafra. On June 5, 1968, the Nigerians shot down a Red Cross plane in broad daylight.

Only Hank Warton and his pilots had the code for the beacon of the Uli airport and the ability to find the airport at night and make the exciting landing with any degree of certainty. Warton was not sharing this crucial information with anyone. An entrepreneur, Warton would fly anything, anywhere for the right price, including munitions, food, and people into Uli. Mounting an airlift of food seemed impossible.

As the situation inside Biafra grew more desperate, E. H. Johnson visited in August 1968. The air blockade was in effect, but a Swedish pilot Count Gustav von Rosen with a load of food aid broke the blockade in a daring flight into and out of the Uli airport. Johnson was on the flight out of Biafra. In a dramatic moment, Johnson upstaged a Red Cross official, at an ICRC press conference, who was arguing the air blockade made it impossible to get food into Biafra. Johnson was living proof it was possible to fly in and out of Biafra. Far more important than Johnson's witness to the breaking of the blockade, was that the Biafrans had given Johnson the Uli landing codes.

The whole complexion of the Biafran situation had changed. The churches did not need to wait on the slow pace of negotiations between the ICRC and the Nigerian Federal Government, they could start their own airlift.

Canadian Presbyterian missionaries inside Biafra took on roles managing food distribution and ensuring medical dispensary and vaccination programs functioned. An interesting combination of players who were involved in these projects inside Biafra. Alex Zeidman of the Scott Mission in Toronto being among them. Zeidman commented, "Having returned from service in Biafra I am excited by the way the church has rallied to the challenge presented to it and how Christians the world over have witnessed to their faith in the relief operations in that war-torn part of Africa."

In the summer of 1968, a coalition of Canadian groups came together with the goal of getting food aid into Biafra. The Nigeria/Biafra Relief Fund of Canada was a combination of Christian groups, aid agencies, and concerned citizens. They hoped to convince the federal government, which had planes, to second some of their resources to the food and medicine airlift. In late October the government did in fact send a Hercules aircraft and crew to Fernando Po, an island about thirty minutes flying time from the Nigerian coast, to join the ICRC air lift. The Hercules flew only eight missions into Biafra, before the Canadian government withdrew it. The expressed reason was that the Port Harcourt airport had been captured by the Nigerians, and the Uli airport, which was simply a strip of highway with the trees around it removed, was unable to handle the Hercules. Therefore, the government argued there was no purpose to be served in keeping planes at Fernando Po. At the same time, the Nigerian Federal government was pressuring the Canadian government to withdraw the Hercules. The presence of Canadian government planes, the Nigerians argued was a de facto recognition of Biafra as an independent state. The Nigerians maintained that the Biafra-Nigerian conflict was an internal matter and therefore neither the Canadian government, nor any other government, should become involved in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. The Biafra lobby group based in Canada believed this pressure

impacted the Canadian government, and Canada backed down. In any case, the withdrawal of the Hercules was a major blow to Canadians hoping to get aid into Biafra.

Through the summer of 1968 a group of European churches, primarily Scandinavian and German, put together a coalition of churches and agencies to form Joint Church Aid. JCA was affectionately called Jesus Christ Air by the air crews. JCA flew out of the Portuguese island of Sao Tome, approximately an hour's flight time due south of the Nigerian coast.

Caritas Internationalis, the Catholic Relief agency, had been flying food out of Sao Tome since May. This second airlift was controversial and, in the eyes of the Nigerians, illegal in international law. The flights going into Uli did not have Federal government sanction, and food flown in by Hank Warton's team was accompanied by arms for the Biafrans. The Nigerians considered these flights legitimate military targets. This made day-time flights into Biafra originating in Sao Tome dangerous. But in August 1968, when Johnson brought out the landing codes, Caritas, JCA and other aid groups could fly their own planes into Uli at night.

Embarrassed by the Canadian government's withdrawal of the Hercules, a number of concerned Canadians were casting around for a way to respond to the growing crisis. Jack Grant, a Jewish businessman, came to E. H. Johnson in November 1968 with a proposal. If the Canadian government would not fly aid into Biafra, what was to stop Canadians concerned about the issue from buying a plane and flying aid into Biafra. Johnson pulled in The Rev. Eoin S. Mackay of Rosedale Presbyterian Church, Toronto to chair this new venture. Oxfam Canada was also a lead player. The group worked feverishly through the holiday season, meeting December 23 and 27 and January 2. The group called itself Canairelief. Another

shift had taken place. Those closest to the Biafran crisis were no longer willing to wait for the Canadian government. The time for pressure tactics was over, it was time to act.

The challenges in operating Canairelief were enormous. A plane had to be found and crewed to operate half a world away. That meant finding the necessary financial resources to mount such an operation for the initial three months. This required a focused publicity campaign. Finally, Canairelief needed to deal with the criticism that would inevitably be part of this endeavour.

Through Nordair a plane was acquired, and so was a crew. A Flight Operations director was brought on board. Eventually, Nordair was contracted to handle all flight operations on the five planes Canairelief operated. Canairelief flew L-1049H Super Constellations. The "Connies" could carry twenty tons of food and medicine each flight. They rarely carried more than seventeen tons of aid; extra fuel was needed for the routine circling of the Uli airport caused

by the stacking of planes. The Canairelief Connies had the largest capacity of any of the planes in JCA. The airlift into Biafra still stands as the largest non-military airlift in world history.

To face the fund-raising challenge, the executive committee brought in a public relations expert, Ardel McKenna, to develop a comprehensive campaign for Canairelief. A series of print ads ran in local newspapers and news magazines. One dramatic full-page magazine ad was black on the top two-thirds of the page with the words, in white, "WHO CARES." Across the bottom of the page red "BIAFRA" appeared, with blood dripping from the letters. Superimposed on the blood in small block letters were the words, "Every night Canairelief feeds almost one million people one small meal. One flight costs \$4200.00. \$15.00 feeds one thousand people. We need you help." The ad included the address and phone number

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of the Canairelief Toronto office. A brochure was widely distributed, inviting readers to "Be part of Canada's First Air Relief Service." Contending that "Men, women, and children - a race of human beings - face death and extermination" Canadians were urged to make a difference. "Take one airplane...a brave crew...add a mountain of faith...and YOU! What do we have? - a team - a team called "CANAIRELIEF"." Included in the fund-raising campaign were table place-mats which could be used at church events promoting Canairelief. The powder blue placemats depicted a Canairelief Super-Constellation in flight in dark blue, with the words "Constellation of Compassion." On the placemat were the stylized double fish of the Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service section of the World Council of Churches. In addition to print material there were scripts for radio interviews. The scripts worked two ways. They gave interviewees answers to questions they might be asked. The questions provided interviewers, who often had little knowledge of Biafra, with a framework for their interviews.

The publicity and fund-raising plan was well planned with the leadership of Canairelief clear about their objectives, aggressively going after their goals. The Canairelief team was media savvy and the press was sympathetic towards the mission. The *Toronto Star* of Feb. 21, 1969 was typical. The editorial took direct aim at Prime Minister Trudeau, "Last summer asked about the crisis in Biafra, he [Trudeau] shrugged, "Where's Biafra?" If he still doesn't know, let him ask church leaders." The majority of the media were on the side of the churches, regarding the Federal Government's inaction inhumane.

The Canairelief operation was an adventure in every sense of the word. Decisions were made not on the basis of funds in the bank, but on the basis of what would best meet the goal of feeding the people of Biafra. Flying into the Uli airport was an adventure. The presence of "Intruders" (Nigerian Federal government fighters and bombers) meant relief planes could only land at night, with a minimum of light. The first flight out of Sao Tome each night was scheduled to arrive over the Nigerian coast after dark. Twenty minutes before making landfall, all external lights

and cabin lights were extinguished. The only light allowed was the captain's penlight flashlight to read maps. Thirty minutes more flying brought the plane over the Uli beacon. If it was the first flight of the night and there were no intruders, it would land. If there were intruders or the runway was occupied, the flight joined the other planes circling south-east of the airport, until the Uli control tower told the crew to land. Beginning the descent in complete darkness, both on the plane and on the ground, it was not until the plane was at an altitude of 1,000 feet, that the pilot would ask the control tower to turn on the runway lights and would turn on the plane's lights. The plane would land. As soon as the engines were reversed, the control tower was radioed to turn off the runway lights. The plane taxied to the unloading area, where with a minimum amount of light was used. The goal was to have the last flight of the night back over the Atlantic before dawn. On a good night, Uli airport could handle thirty flights, with some planes making two trips a night.

On the night of August 3, 1969, Canairelief plane CF-NAJ crashed in its final approach to Uli killing all on board. There were no "intruders" in the air space over Uli, rather it is likely with no lights on the ground Captain Donald Merriam miscalculated where he was, flying into a ridge fifteen kilometers north of the Uli airport. Merriam, an experienced pilot, had seen action in World War 2. The death of the four member Canadian crew (Merriam, First Officer Raymond Levesque, Flight Engineer Vincent Wakeling, and Loadmaster Gary Libbus) was front of Biafra. Flying into the Uli airport was an adventure. The presence of "Intruders" (Nigerian Federal page news. *The Globe and Mail* eulogized the crew: "Heroism has different degrees of nobility, but surely at the top of the scale must be that of those who venture into great danger, not to serve nationalism, but the cause of those too weak to serve themselves. They knew the risks they took. They took them because they put the suffering of a brave and independent people above their own safety. Canadians can show pride in their sacrifice only by keeping the rest of Canairelief's planes filled and flying."

With surprising suddenness the war was over on January 12, 1970. Biafran resistance collapsed, and Okujwu and his closest aides flew to Gabon and went into exile. Two to three days before the collapse, many ex-patriot aid workers inside Biafra, sensing the end was near, flew out on JCA flights returning to Sao Tome. Joint Church Aid, with its contacts inside the former Biafra, offered to continue flying food aid into Biafra for the Nigerian government to distribute. Their offer was turned down. The adventure was over.

During the twenty-month airlift, the Red Cross had flown in some 21,000 tons, while the coalition flying out of Sao Tome had taken nearly 60,000 tons of food and medicine into the blockaded territory. Canairelief planes had flown a total of 677 flights into Biafra, 13% of all relief flights out of Sao Tome. The size of the Connies meant they had carried about 20% of all the food aid. The 13-month adventure had cost \$3.25 million (\$22.5 million in 2019 dollars), two-thirds of which had been raised by Canadian organizations. The other third came from other relief agencies buying space on Canairelief flights. The organization never borrowed funds, because "money was provided by daily miracles."

## CONCLUSION

As the situation in Biafra had become increasingly grave, and a number of Canadians gave eye-witness accounts of events in Biafra, church leaders and other Canadians were unwilling to sit back and wait. Seeing a situation demanding action, concerned Canadians acted, building a coalition of like-minded individuals. This coalition shared only one commonality, a desire to feed the hungry in Biafra. Coalition building around a single cause became a model for future action. A similar approach was used in the development of Joint Church Aid, those prepared to act, regardless of the niceties of international law and diplomatic protocol worked together. It was a coalition for a par-

ticular time and place, the next situation would be responded to by a new coalition with a new set of players involved. Not all the players in the Nigeria/Biafra Relief Fund nor in Canairelief were Christians or even involved in the relief effort for religious reasons. The language used by the coalition partners was not faith language, instead they used the language of humanitarian need. This was the language used in publicity about Canairelief, it was also the language key figures like E.H. Johnson used in addressing political figures, like the Standing Committee on External Affairs.

The coalition partners believed because they were non-government organizations, whose sole goal was

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to feed the hungry, their help would be welcomed by all parties, including the Nigerians. JCA was shocked to discover that they were persona non grata in Nigeria following the end of the war. Not only was their help not needed, it was not wanted. The Canadian missionaries and church leaders learned that the way they saw themselves, and the way they

were perceived by the world at large, were two very different things. The churches involved with JCA learned they were seen as political players by both sides in the conflict, no matter how much the churches insisted they were not supporting one side over the other.

The mainline church in Canada, which had been struggling to understand its mission role in the world, suddenly found a way to re-formulate that mission in terms acceptable to an increasingly multi-cultural Canada and in a world that was becoming ever more accepting of a wide variety of faith commitments. The church could find a new mission in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and healing the sick. Canadian churches could bravely step on to the international stage as non-governmental organizations who had learned to live their faith by speaking the language of humanitarian need.

## *Historical Vignette*

Below is an excerpt from the Preface to the 1918 *Book of Praise*, which the denomination used for 54 years.

*The Book of Praise, which is a revision of The Presbyterian Book of Praise of 1897, contains a comprehensive collection of Psalms and Hymns for congregational worship, for use in the various organizations of the Church, and for family worship and private devotion.*

*The first place in the Book is given to 134 songs from the Old Testament Psalms. The majority...drawn from the historic Scottish Psalter of 1650, retouched where it has been considered necessary....The inclusion of such renderings as those of Sternhold, Milton, Tate and Brady, Watts, Montgomery, Keble, Rawson, and Lyte, in association with the more literal versions, cannot fail to have a strong influence in maintaining for the Psalter that place of prominence which is its due.*

*While the Book in its content, by preserving that which has become endeared by long use and hallowed association, is true to the spirit and tradition of our Church, its larger aim is to offer a collection of spirit songs widely representative of the Hymnody of the Church universal. Canticles of the ancient Church, translations and transfusions of early and medieval Greek and Latin Hymns, songs of the time of the Reformation and period following, and a rich appropriation from the treasures of modern English Hymnody, at once bring those who use them into communion of worship with the Church of the past, and with all who to-day call upon the name of the Lord Jesus, their Lord and ours....*

*Cross-references are placed at the end of each sub-section, suggesting psalms or hymns cognate to its particular subject, although contained in other parts of the Book....the requirements of an index of subjects are to a large extent met. [While there was no subject index, there was an "Index of Scripture Texts".] The value of this is especially pronounced for the section entitled 'For the Young'. The hymns within that section, together with psalms and hymns indicated by cross-reference, supply a Children's Hymnal of about 250 songs, selected with the utmost care.*

*In providing Music, the compilers have kept clearly in mind the fact that The Book of Praise is intended for use not in congregational worship alone, but also in all religious gatherings of old or young. Consequently, the range of the music extends from the very simple melody to the more complex forms of musical expression, and is representative of many types. While the tunes have been selected, for the most part, from the treasures of modern hymn music, a feature of the Book is the extent to which other sources have been drawn upon. A group of plainsong melodies, specially arranged for The Book of Praise are associated chiefly with ancient and mediaeval hymns. Tunes of Genevan, Scottish, and English origin, which have come to us from the Reformation era, have been given the prominence which their dignity, devotional intensity, and clear melody warrant. A new element, moreover, has been introduced by the inclusion of a number of English traditional melodies, and especially Welsh hymn melodies, which, it is believed, will speedily find favour with our congregations, and give impulse to the song of the people.*

*The Committee reverently lays this result of its labours at the feet of the Great Head of the Church, Whose blessing is invoked upon this sincere endeavour to promote God's praise; and it cherishes the hope that the Church may be enabled, more worthily than ever, to fulfill the injunction: 'Both young men and maidens; old men and children: Let them praise the name of the Lord; for God's name is excellent; God's glory is above the earth and heaven.'*

## Book Notes

Craig C. Hill, *Servant of All: Status, Ambition, and the Way of Jesus*, (Eerdmans, 2016), 203 pgs.

Hill's book is academically solid, but I was disappointed by the lack of theological depth. Little here critiques the toxic power of ambition even though humility stands at the heart of the Way of Jesus. John Dickson's *Humilitas* is a more helpful in exploring how the Way of Jesus was lived out by the early church and what that might look like today.

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Winn Collier, *Love Big, Be Well: Letters to a Small-Town Church*, (Eerdmans, 2017), 166 pgs.

Collier is the pastor of All Saints Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, and a gifted writer. *Love Big, Be Well*, introduces us, through a series of letters, by Jonas McAnn to the people and geography of Granby Presbyterian Church. Jonas is painfully honest about himself and very observant of the world. Jonas raises questions in his letters, "I want...to help us remember (to help me remember) that this human life in this physical place is the life God has given us. I want to learn more about what it means to live together well, as God's people." (p. 87)

Collier reminds us our calling is not to have a plan to change the world, or even our neighbourhood, rather we are to live into what we say we believe, "Let's shake off the fear and the hesitation and just do what we believe until our mind or our imagination or our desires catch up." (p. 92)

Collier's book is to be read slowly and savoured deeply.

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Miguel A. De Le Torre, *Burying White Privilege: Resurrecting A Bad-Ass Christianity*, (Eerdmans, 2019), 153 pgs.

I am writing this review 2 days after the shootings in El Paso, Texas, which gives this book a heightened urgency. The book opens with the familiar

tropes describing and decrying individuals De Le Torre calls "white Christian nationalists." Unexpectedly the book turns from the familiar tropes to: "It should be no secret that some of the worst racists are usually white liberals...it is the liberals and moderates who, with bleeding hearts, decry the injustices they see while insisting that any remedy must proceed in a lawful and orderly manner – the same law and order responsible for structural oppression...the micro-aggressions of my white colleagues inflict the small papers cuts that with time will cause me to bleed to death." (pp. 44-45) And "The underlying meaning of political correctness is inclusiveness as long as people of color first convert to whiteness and respond appreciatively to the varied translations of their respective cultures." (p. 119)

Those who would describe themselves as allies of people of color, as being pro-immigrant, should read this book. It will not be a comfortable read.

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Michael Mather, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places*, (Eerdmans, 2018), 146 pgs.

Mather has served inner city congregations in South Bend, Indiana and Indianapolis. At the heart his book stands the question: how do you define abundance?

Outside observers would say the congregations Mather served were anything but abundant, and the congregational members were certainly not living abundant lives. But that would be to equate abundance with affluence – a tragically fatal error many North Americans, including Christians of all stripes (from evangelical to liberal) have made.

Mather's book challenges the ways we define abundance and confronts the highly individualized patterns that are part of the middle-class church. To read this book is to be challenged by how bereft of abundance is the affluenza of middle-class church life. Another uncomfortably challenging book which makes readers ask important questions.

## Books

Again, to reduce the backlog of books to be reviewed here is a list of books that have been received by Presbyterian History that will not be reviewed. That I am moving to a new congregation in the fall has made managing the book review shelf an urgent matter.

*Theological Anthropology is growing in importance, here is a collection of books that raise various aspects of this complex and wide-ranging conversation:*

- Antonia Lopez & Javier Prades, eds., *Retrieving Origins and the Claim of Multiculturalism*, (Eerdmans, 2014).
- Charles C. Camosy, *Beyond the Abortion Wars: A Way Forward for a New Generation*, (Eerdmans, 2015).
- Malcolm Jeeves, ed., *The Emergence of Personhood: A Quantum Leap?*, (Eerdmans, 2015).
- William T. Cavanaugh & James K. A. Smith, eds., *Evolution and The Fall*, (Eerdmans, 2017).
- Susan Grove Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology*, (Eerdmans, 2017).

Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, (Eerdmans, 2015).  
*A tour de force, essential reading for everyone preaching on the crucifixion with wisdom and insight.*

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim Progress*, retold by Gary D. Schmidt, ill. by Barry Moser, (Eerdmans, 2008).

Joyce Ann Zimmerman, *Worship with Gladness: Understanding Worship from the Heart*, (Eerdmans, 2014).

Dale T. Irvin, ed., *The Protestant Reformation and World Christianity: Global Perspectives*, (Eerdmans, 2017).

David F. Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant: Reformation Faith in Today's World*, 2nd ed., (Eerdmans, 2017).

John Millbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Spilt in Modern Catholic Theology*, 2nd ed., (Eerdmans, 2014).

James E. Bradley & Richard A. Muller, *Church History: An Introduction to Research Methods and Resources*, 2nd ed., (Eerdmans, 2016).

John W. Stewart, *Envisioning the Congregation, Practicing the Gospel: A Guide for Pastors and Lay Leaders*, (Eerdmans, 2015).

H. Dana Fearon III with Gordon S. Mikoski, *Straining at the Oars: Case Studies in Pastoral Leadership*, (Eerdmans, 2013).

Mark R. Gornik & Maria Liu Wong, *Stay in the City: How Christian Faith is Flourishing in an Urban World*, (Eerdmans, 2017).

Paul Mojzes, ed., *North American Church and the Cold War*, (Eerdmans, 2018).

Ruth A. Meyers, *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission: Gathering as God's People, Going Out in God's Name*, (Eerdmans, 2014).

Anne Robertson, *New Vision for an Old Story: Why the Bible Might Not Be the Book You Think It Is*, (Eerdmans, 2018).

Peter Harris & Rod Wilson, *Keeping Faith in Fundraising*, (Eerdmans, 2017).

Laura Sumner Truax & Amalya Campbell, *Love Let Go: Radical Generosity for the Real World*, (Eerdmans, 2017).

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**PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY**  
**ISSN 0827-9713**