

**Canadian Society of
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History**
Papers 2021

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Edited by Jonathan N. Cleland

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About the Canadian Society of Presbyterian History

Dedicated to the Study of Presbyterian History and Reformed History

The Canadian Society of Presbyterian History (CSPH) is a religion-centred learned society. It meets annually on the last Saturday of September. Since its founding in 1975, about 200 papers have been presented. A sampling is published on **csph.ca**.

Membership is open to individuals and institutions that share an interest in and a fascination for the study of Presbyterian and Reformed history.

About the Authors of the 2021 Papers

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Rescripting the Stories of Church Union: Making and Remaking Identity

Phyllis D. Airhart

I first came across the term “rescripting” at an event for North American theological schools involved in a Lilly-funded faculty development project. Nick Nissley, then the Executive Director of the Banff Centre, was another of the participants. Commenting on the challenges of institutional change, he introduced us to the practice of “rescription,” which he and Stedman Graham used in working with organizations that had found themselves “stuck in dysfunctional story lines” after failing to meet objectives. They encouraged leaders to devise “an alternative script” to find “a future narrative that will identify what’s needed to become unstuck.”¹

The focus of the gathering was theological education, but I could not resist the temptation to connect Nissley’s presentation to the research project I was working on at the time. I wondered if it was a way of thinking about an aspect of church union that had intrigued me: how Methodists in Canada rather suddenly became reviled as modernists and worse during the church union controversy. It seemed that Presbyterian opponents of church union had succeeded in changing the narrative after they failed to stop the creation of the United Church of Canada in the courts of their church. Not only did they defend the continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada; they also launched an attack that transformed the identity of Methodist supporters of union into theological innovators and “accidental modernists.”²

The stories that anti-unionists told about themselves and their denominational rivals during the controversy over church union contributed to the bitterness after its consummation in 1925; they also cast a longer shadow over the Presbyterian Church and the United Church as participants in the international ecumenical movement after 1925. This paper begins by examining the Presbyterian experience of rescripting the identity of church union supporters by presenting them in an unfavourable light. It then looks at the rescripting of the denomination’s own ecumenical identity after the Second World War. One of the issues that vexed the ecumenical movement during the 1950s and beyond was a conception of “world mission” as being both geographical (i.e., missionaries proclaiming the Christian message around the world) and programmatic (the church as the people of God with a mission in the world). The shift in emphasis from supporting “missions” at home and abroad to being part of God’s “mission” in the world provided an occasion for rethinking ecumenism and denominational identity in a rapidly changing world. However, the understandings of the purpose of the church that emerged not only divided denominations from each other as in the past but created new internal ruptures as well.

¹ Nick Nissley and Stedman Graham, “The Narrative Lens and Organizational Change,” *Leadership in Action* 28 (January/February 2009): 14–17.

² I noted the irony of Methodists being recast as modernists in Phyllis D. Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 47–51. I later teased out the cross-border connections in Phyllis D. Airhart, “The Accidental Modernists: American Fundamentalism and the Canadian Church Union Debate,” *Church History* 86, no. 1 (2017): 120–144.

Rescripting Church Union in the 1920s

The controversy over church union in the 1920s exposed differences among Presbyterians in Canada about confessional identity and the place of the institutional church in society. But these same matters were on the minds of Presbyterians elsewhere. The debate in Canada grew more raucous when those opposed to it exchanged tactics with the party in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. that was waging battle over these issues under the banner of defending the fundamentals of the faith. Much to their chagrin, union supporters in Canada found themselves in the crosshairs of J. Gresham Machen, then of Princeton Seminary. As the leading spokesperson for confessional orthodoxy, Machen famously fought theological modernism. But, as historian D.G. Hart notes, Machen's antagonism to early twentieth-century ecumenism has generally been overlooked.³ This is hinted at in Machen's letter of encouragement for the Presbyterians who refused to concur with the adjournment of the General Assembly in 1925 and insisted on continuing as the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Comparing their ordeal to what was happening in the United States, he identified what he saw as their common source: "a compromising interdenominationalism."⁴ He had condemned such initiatives in *Christianity and Liberalism* as "a union with the world against the Lord, or at best a forced union of machinery and tyrannical committees."⁵ He was particularly critical of the social programs of what he called the "modern" church, dismissing them as having more to do with bettering conditions on earth than preparing for heaven. The mission of the church was strictly spiritual and only indirectly, at most, to Christianize the social order.⁶

A turning point in the Canadian controversy came when Machen's attack on the "modernists" in his own denomination was rescripted and applied to supporters of church union, thus casting a group of mainly moderate evangelicals into the role of modernists or worse: apostates who could no longer be considered Christian. *Christianity and Liberalism* appeared in 1923, securing a prominent international role for Machen in the debate over theological modernism just as a pivotal new phase of resistance to church union was beginning in Canada. Anti-unionists now came armed with a new line of attack, bluntly accusing the unionists of harboring modernist tendencies. Methodists, once spurned by some Presbyterians as faulty in their theology—not owing to modernism, but because of their reputation for aggressive evangelism that more staid Presbyterians considered unseemly—were targeted as the chief source of this new threat. Anti-unionists winked at those in their own ranks who were closer to being modernists than fundamentalists in matters of doctrine as they attempted to rescript their resistance to church union as a defense of the faith.⁷

In retrospect what is striking is that there is scant evidence of either the Basis of Union or Methodist theology being tagged as modernist before the 1920s. Even those who later became critics initially praised the new doctrinal statement. In 1909 an editorial in the *Presbyterian Record* (initialed by the editor Ephraim Scott, a strident opponent of church union a few years later)

³ D.G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 66–68.

⁴ Machen's letter was written into the *Acts and Proceedings* along with a motion of appreciation for his help "in securing men for our congregations and minority groups, and for his substantial and continued interest in our cause." *Acts & Proceedings* 1925, 128.

⁵ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1923), 179.

⁶ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 149.

⁷ Advocates of the "new theology" were still few in either denomination. Moir notes that it was the Methodists who had more objections to higher criticism. See John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada*, 3rd ed. (Burlington, ON: Eagle Press, [2004?]), 202.

described it as a “full, simple, and Scriptural” statement that “must impress every thoughtful reader.”⁸ The sticking point, as it turned out, was not the Basis of Union itself. Congregationalists considered the defence of liberty of conscience as one of their distinctive features. Like their Puritan forebears, they held that believers should be free to express the truths of the Christian faith in their own words rather than repeating a creed. During the church union negotiations, they insisted that even ministers need only to be in “essential agreement” with the doctrinal statement when they took their ordination vows.

Even so, this issue was not new to the Presbyterian Church in Canada according to Daniel J. Fraser, professor of New Testament at Presbyterian College, Montreal, in an article published in the *Harvard Theological Review* in 1915. Despite his own opposition to church union, Fraser considered “essential agreement” with the Basis of Union a compromise that would provide relief to “many a sensitive candidate for ordination” who felt torn between intellectual integrity and insincerity.⁹ When a few years later he became president of the Presbyterian Church Association, an organization with the express purpose of thwarting church union, such comments would come back to haunt him. George Pidgeon, minister of Bloor Street Presbyterian Church (who was to become the first moderator of the United Church) protested the “absolute dishonesty” of those who claimed that “Church Union is the Canadian form of Modernism” while retaining Fraser as president of the Presbyterian Church Association.¹⁰ An editorial in the *Presbyterian Witness* reminded readers of the relaxed position on the Westminster Confession that Fraser had taken in Harvard’s journal, drolly claiming to be puzzled that those who denounced such views “as heresy and subversive of the very foundations of the Christian faith” had somehow managed to reconcile their convictions “to the leadership of one by whom they are held and taught.”¹¹ Yet anti-unionists insisted that “the Church formed by the organic union of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches of Canada will be a Church without a creed.”¹² Strong support for church union among respected Presbyterian conservatives and moderates like Pidgeon made for awkward alignments once opposition to union was reframed as a defense of the fundamentals of the faith.

The anti-unionist efforts ultimately failed to prevent passage of the United Church of Canada Act, which stipulated that Presbyterian churches would become part of the United Church on 10 June 1925 unless the majority of a congregation’s members voted to remain outside. The last best hope of preserving the Presbyterian Church in Canada was thus to limit their losses. In a letter to a union supporter in 1924, Pidgeon confided that he had heard a rumor that the “anti’s” were planning to use some new ammunition to raise doubts about the theological soundness of the uniting parties.¹³ His suspicions were confirmed in the pamphlet and periodical warfare that ensued when the “anti’s” used similar arguments to Machen’s in *Christianity and Liberalism* as a blueprint

⁸ “Church Union” [editorial], *Presbyterian Record*, April 1909, 147. Scott’s earlier praise of the Basis of Union came back to bite him. Over a decade later R.E. Welsh, a professor at Wesleyan Theological College in Montreal, taunted him for his 1909 editorial, noting its marked contrast to his present description of the United Church as a “creedless” church that had opened its door to error. See R.E. Welsh, “The Things That Matter in Church Union,” n.p., n.d., 1–2.

⁹ Daniel James Fraser, “Recent Church Union Movements in Canada,” *Harvard Theological Review* 8, no. 3 (1915): 369–370.

¹⁰ George C. Pidgeon to G.B. McLennan, 21 November 1924, George C. Pidgeon Papers, United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto, ON, box 4-91.

¹¹ “Principal Fraser on the Basis of Union” [editorial], *Presbyterian Witness*, 18 October 1923, 3.

¹² “The Creed of the United Church of Canada” [editorial], *Presbyterian Witness*, 9 August 1923, 2.

¹³ George C. Pidgeon to G.B. McLennan.

for casting Methodists as not only liberal but apostate. It was an attention-grabbing move aimed at damaging the theological reputation of the unionists. Methodist leaders in Canada were stunned and furious to hear their church described as not only creedless and modernist, but now even apostate.

Machen and other critics of church union had signalled that doctrine was not the only reason for alarm. Church union opened a new round in the ongoing debate about the church's role in Canadian society. The denominations that formed the United Church had been strong supporters of the missionary movement of the early twentieth century that gave rise to the modern ecumenical movement. The first of several votes on church union took place in 1910, the same year that an extraordinary conference was held in Edinburgh—often considered the first international missionary conference, and an event that was of crucial importance for the modern ecumenical movement. But the Edinburgh Conference also highlighted efforts to Christianize the social order, a theme that, along with evangelization, was emphasized.¹⁴ The missionary movement, with its many voices, deeper pockets, and undeniable link to the evangelical impulse of the past, joined the cause of moral and social crusaders in aiming to Christianize all areas of life. The story of church union in Canada, as presented by its supporters, pictured Protestants cooperating to create an efficiently run church that would shape the nation by instilling Christian values; critics, however, belittled their aspirations.

The underlying theological and institutional tensions that stoked the controversy before union continued beyond 1925. Machen's sympathizers shored up fundamentalist attacks on the new denomination, perpetuating inside of Canada and even beyond what United leaders believed to be a distorted image of a church that was creedless, modernist, no longer evangelical, and perhaps not even Christian. The largely concocted but convincingly publicized rescripting of its identity transformed middle-of-the-road pragmatists into innovators whose theology was suspect, a reputation that proved difficult to shake. It also cast doubt on its founding vision with its call to Christianize the social order.

It was a Canadian influenced by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth whose direction proved to be more decisive for the continuing Presbyterians than Machen's. At Knox College, Walter Bryden championed a theological perspective unlike either fundamentalism or modernism or even the progressive orthodoxy of the moderates. Yet he too shared suspicions of the United Church's "modern" assumptions and joined fundamentalists in repudiating both its inclusive statement of faith and ambitions for a public role in Canada.¹⁵ Bryden's ecclesiology also disclosed a complaint that was common among anti-modernists, anti-unionists, and anti-ecumenical Barthians, which he laid out in 1934 in a book titled *Why I Am a Presbyterian*: the doctrine of salvation was ignored and the "task" of the church as an enterprise had become paramount.¹⁶ He feared that some of his Presbyterian co-religionists were in danger of drifting where the unionists had led by "estimating themselves and the significance of their Church in the light of this country, and the conditions obtaining here, alone."¹⁷

¹⁴ Dana Robert, "The First Globalization: The Internationalization of the Protestant Missionary Movement between the World Wars," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26, no. 2 (2002): 50.

¹⁵ W.W. Bryden, *Why I Am a Presbyterian* (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1934). There are echoes of Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* in his allegation that "a great deal of the Union sentiment which has found expression in modern times is the direct result of a modernistic outlook upon life, which is not essentially Christian" (26).

¹⁶ Bryden, *Why I Am a Presbyterian*, 66–7.

¹⁷ Bryden, *Why I Am a Presbyterian*, 73.

Rethinking Missions and Rescripting Church Unity

The chapter on “The Long Crisis of Church Union” in John Moir’s *Enduring Witness* ends with these words: “each parted without charity for the other.”¹⁸ But as the 40th anniversary of church union approached, most of the old wounds left by the controversy over its founding had seemed to heal. By 1963, relations between the two churches were so friendly that a local newspaper reporter had the temerity to ask the minister of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Kitchener, himself a former moderator, whether the United Church was “Presbyterian.” Answering “yes,” Findlay G. Stewart explained that those who continued as the Presbyterian Church had resisted church union because they “were opposed to organizing the Kingdom of God.” But the United Church had since “evolved,” as he put it, and the “old Methodist traditions had not remained in the fabric”—more evidence perhaps of the success of the anti-unionists in “rescripting” Methodist identity. Asked whether the time had come for Presbyterians to join the United Church, Stewart retorted that it was “just as fair to ask why the United Church doesn’t return to Presbyterianism in name since it already has in fact.” He predicted that such a union might happen within a generation.¹⁹

That outcome was stalled by old tensions that flared again in the 1960s, fuelled by developments outside as well as inside Canada. The world had dramatically changed over the half century since the Edinburgh Conference, imperilling the enthusiasm for world missions and the hopes for Christian unity that it had inspired. Its watchword had been “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” But as to what evangelization entailed there was no agreement. The interwar years saw the emergence of a more expansive approach to evangelism that defined it as any activity that delivered the message of Jesus Christ, whether preaching, teaching, or healing.²⁰ Rethinking evangelism and missions along those lines reshaped missionary education in North America through programs such as the one offered at the interdenominational Canadian School of Missions.²¹ Machen, who by then had left Princeton Seminary to found Westminster Theological Seminary, created more controversy in 1933 by demanding that the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions fire Pearl Buck, author of the prize-winning novel *The Good Earth*, for her criticism of the missionary enterprise in China.²²

Given the ties between missions and Christian unity, it is not surprising that ecumenical cooperation was drawn into what John Moir calls “a civil war” within the Presbyterian Church.²³ What he refers to as “the opening shot” was fired in the 1940s with opposition to support for

¹⁸ Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 223.

¹⁹ “United Church Is Now Presbyterian: Dr Stewart,” *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, 4 May 1963. Ernest Edgar Long Papers, United Church of Canada Archives, box 11-173 (scrapbook).

²⁰ Jerald D. Gort, “Jerusalem 1928: Mission, Kingdom and Church,” *International Review of Mission* 67, no. 3 (1978): 287–90; James Alan Patterson, “The Loss of a Protestant Missionary Consensus: Foreign Missions and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict,” in *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880–1980*, eds. Joel A. Carpenter & Wilbert R. Shenk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 84–91; and Grant Wacker, “Second Thoughts on the Great Commission: Liberal Protestants and Foreign Missions,” in *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions*, 282–300.

²¹ For the influence of the new approach to evangelism at the Canadian School of Missions, see Robert Wright, *A World Mission: Canadian Protestantism and the Quest for a New International Order, 1918–1939* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), 142–177.

²² Grant Wacker, “The Waning of the Missionary Impulse: The Case of Pearl S. Buck,” in *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home: Explorations in North American Cultural History*, eds. Daniel H. Bays & Grant Wacker (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 192.

²³ Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 252.

missionary cooperation that equated ecumenism with theological modernism. It was an early skirmish in what was shaping up to be another clash between liberal and conservative Protestants, with those identified with fundamentalism about to undergo a “rescripting” of their own. In a provocative article challenging the widespread use of the “Bebbington quadrilateral” to define evangelicalism, Daniel Silliman, news editor of *Christianity Today*, observes a point not often noticed by historians of American religion: both sides in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy had described themselves as “evangelical.”²⁴ The 1940s was a turning point, he argues. After several prominent fundamentalists grew unhappy with how their faith was branded in the popular mind, they set out to update fundamentalism as “more serious, more organized, and, most of all, more respectable.”²⁵

Silliman contends that central to “constructing” evangelicalism was a new magazine that would define its boundaries. Among those selected for the first editorial team of what became *Christianity Today* was J. Marcellus Kik, one of the Princeton Seminary students who left with Machen to attend his new seminary. He was also among its graduates who accepted calls to ministry from continuing Presbyterian churches in Canada, in Kik’s case New Brunswick. Silliman notes that Kik already had editorial experience with *Bible Christianity*, an anti-modernist paper he launched in 1935. Hearing that Billy Graham was allied with a new magazine, he offered his expertise after his paper folded in 1951.²⁶ It was he who introduced another of Machen’s students to the editors: W. Stanford Reid, whose father had helped to finance Kik’s paper.²⁷ Meanwhile old misgivings about church union and its ties to liberal theology had resurfaced in opposition to the Presbyterian Church’s involvement in ecumenical ventures such as the formation of Canadian Council of Churches in 1944 and especially the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948.²⁸ Kik and Reid were among those who carried on Machen’s battle with what they saw as modernism in a new guise. Moir identifies Reid as a key critic of cooperative initiatives “who soon assumed the role of spokesman for the anti-ecumenists.”²⁹

By the time the WCC met in New Delhi in 1961 for its third General Assembly, there was a new flashpoint. The WCC’s merger with the International Missionary Council that year served to accentuate the double meaning of “world mission”: global in geographical reach but also concerned with programs to reach the world outside the institutional church. Just as evangelicals constructed new communication networks for their discourse community, denominations linked by the networks of international ecumenism rescripted their message to a rapidly changing world in pamphlets, committee reports, statements of faith, and other publications.

Ironically, ecumenical initiatives designed to bring churches into closer cooperation by emphasizing their common task instead created divisions over how to be the church in the world. The idea that God’s mission could not be separated from other aspects of the church’s life and

²⁴ Daniel Silliman, “An Evangelical Is Anyone Who Likes Billy Graham: Defining Evangelicalism with Carl Henry and Networks of Trust,” *Church History* 90, no. 4 (2021): 626. I found this to be the case with the United Church of Canada, whose leading liberals continued to lay claim to being evangelical. To compare the tensions between ecumenism and evangelicalism over missions and evangelism (including the role of Billy Graham), see the chapter on “Listening to the World,” in *A Church with the Soul of a Nation*, 225–254.

²⁵ Silliman, “An Evangelical Is Anyone Who Likes Billy Graham,” 627.

²⁶ Silliman, “An Evangelical Is Anyone Who Likes Billy Graham,” 628–630.

²⁷ Silliman, “An Evangelical Is Anyone Who Likes Billy Graham,” 631.

²⁸ Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 242, 251–252.

²⁹ Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 253.

teaching deepened the divide between ecumenical enthusiasts and newly energized evangelical Protestants.³⁰ Critics of ecumenism detected a repudiation of past efforts to convert the world to Christ in the rhetorical move from the enterprises of “world missions” to the church’s “mission to the world.” In *A Church with the Soul of a Nation*, I analyzed that shift as a facet of remaking the United Church in the decades after the Second World War.³¹ Arguably something similar was happening in the Presbyterian Church as well, rescripting its identity in the process.

A case in point is the work of the Presbyterian Church’s Committee on Inter-Church Relations set up by the General Assembly in 1960 “to study the distinctive Presbyterian witness to Christian unity and the catholicity of the Church.” The study material for the church’s courts and congregations that circulated as a pamphlet in 1961 credited the WCC and the World Presbyterian Alliance for shaping a new approach to mission. The foreword to the pamphlet warned readers to expect ideas that were “probably provocative, possibly instructive and challenging” in an effort to engage the church in a “complex and disturbing dialogue.”³² Even with that trigger warning, the material that followed likely raised a few eyebrows. The use of the word “ecumenical” to refer to activity that was merely interdenominational was pronounced as demeaning, since it served “to shrink it disastrously from its rightful import.” As a corrective, the pamphlet quoted the WCC: ecumenism was “everything that relates to the whole task of the whole Church to bring the whole Gospel to the whole world.”³³ It also drew attention to a statement from the WCC’s second General Assembly held in Evanston in 1954, signed by Presbyterian Church in Canada representatives, which conjectured that “inherited forms of life” might need to die to avoid the dividing power of sin.³⁴ One of the discussion questions put it bluntly: “Is it possible, in your opinion, that God may be desiring the death of The Presbyterian Church in Canada in the sense and for the purpose set forth in [paragraph] 169?”³⁵

The foreword to the committee’s 1962 working paper went further, suggesting that much written about “church order” and “ministry” had been “misbegotten and unfruitful” because it disregarded the “fundamental element of mission”: the “deep relation between the church and the world.” The committee did not mince words: to be “church-centred” was to be “sick and disordered.”³⁶ Its report maintained that the “missionary nature” of the Christian’s call “confronts us

³⁰ For an analysis of the momentous paradigm shift in ecclesiology and the role of missionary conferences in reshaping how churches saw their “mission to the world” during the 1950s and 1960s, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 368–393. On the impact of the animosity between Presbyterian liberals and conservatives in the United States, see Milton J Coalter, “Presbyterian Evangelism: A Case of Parallel Allegiances Diverging,” in *The Diversity of Discipleship: Presbyterians and Twentieth-Century Christian Witness*, eds. Milton J Coalter & John M. Mulder (Louisville, KY: WJKP, 1991), 33–54, and Theodore A. Gill Jr, “American Presbyterians in the Global Ecumenical Movement,” in *The Diversity of Discipleship*, 144–145.

³¹ See Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation*, 228–229, 241–244.

³² “Presbyterians and the Church Catholic,” Presbyterian Church in Canada, General Assembly Committee on Inter-Church Relations, 1961, Foreword, [n.p.]; the pamphlet refers to the action of the 1960 General Assembly in describing the committee’s aims.

³³ “Presbyterians and the Church Catholic,” 31–32, para. 150; underlining in the original typescript.

³⁴ “Presbyterians and the Church Catholic,” 34, paras. 168–169.

³⁵ “Presbyterians and the Church Catholic,” Presbyterian Church in Canada, General Assembly Committee on Inter-Church Relations, 1961, 44, para. 218.

³⁶ “Presbyterians and the Church Catholic: A Working Paper,” Presbyterian Church in Canada, General Assembly Committee on Inter-Church Relations, 1962. Foreword, [n.p.].

all with the need for awareness and realism and courage and joy in our personal and corporate attitude toward the world.” Rather than an attitude of hostility and opposition, encountering the world involved “radical identification.”³⁷ The influence of international ecumenism was again evident, for instance, in frequent references to the WCC, including the recent New Delhi assembly.³⁸

One of the leaders in promoting this new approach to mission was McGill University theologian Joseph McLelland, a member of the Committee on Inter-Church Relations and described as having made a “substantial” contribution to its publications.³⁹ In 1965, as Presbyterians celebrated the 40th anniversary of their resistance to church union, he complained that his church had wandered in the wilderness for those forty years, using the memory of the controversy in a futile attempt to create a confessional church mystique and an evangelical ethos⁴⁰—and raising doubts thereby about the United Church’s pedigree. His warnings in the 1960s about his denomination’s insularity from the world and its coming obsolescence echoed the United Church’s concerns about its own future, and his call for a new blueprint for mission triggered clashes not unlike what the United Church and other denominations were facing.⁴¹

Presbyterians as McLelland portrayed them practiced the same civic piety as the United Church: they were associated with an “ethos of conservative, middle class puritanism” and an accepted part of society that right-minded citizens were expected to join.⁴² But times were changing, he warned, and the church had not yet changed with them. His blunt assessment was stated in words that could have just as easily been written by so-called radicals in the United Church: “The lines have shifted and we are not where the action is.”⁴³ He challenged the claim that “evangelicalism” entailed “the separation of God and the world,” insisting rather that “the direction or orientation of the Christian, of the church, is toward the world. He who looks steadfastly on Jesus Christ looks on God’s worldly activity, on his presence in the world.”⁴⁴ Alluding to what he called “the classic words of Evanston” (a reference to the WCC General Assembly held there), he contended that to evangelize is to participate in Christ’s life and ministry to the world.⁴⁵

McLelland’s efforts to rescript mission echoed the case for support of church union in 1925 in cautioning that denominationalism was a danger, not because it prevented unity, but because it hindered the mission of the church. “When,” he asked in 1965, “have we discussed church extension in our church courts without being conscious of the shadow of the United Church as our rival and threat?”⁴⁶ Two years later, in an address to a Presbyterian youth congress, he put his concerns in cheekier terms: “There is no Presbyterian mission. I’m as sorry about that as you are,

³⁷ “Presbyterians and the Church Catholic: A Working Paper,” 22, paras. 89–90.

³⁸ “Presbyterians and the Church Catholic: A Working Paper,” 22–23, paras. 96–103.

³⁹ Stuart Coles, then the secretary for Lay Studies, is identified in the Foreword to both the 1961 and 1962 publications as the main author. He had recently chaired the committee that produced the Confession of Faith Concerning Church and Nation (1955).

⁴⁰ Joseph McLelland, “Why Our Pond Is Lukewarm, or Forty Years in the Wilderness,” addresses to the Toronto and Kingston Synod, October 1965. His title linked his theme to similar concerns in the United Church by playing off the publicity generated by the latter’s publication of essays titled *Why the Sea Is Boiling Hot*, both responses to Pierre Berton’s *The Comfortable Pew*.

⁴¹ J.C. McLelland, “Blueprint for a New Model,” *Presbyterian Record*, September 1967, 10–17.

⁴² McLelland, “Why Our Pond Is Lukewarm,” 10.

⁴³ McLelland, “Blueprint for a New Model,” 12.

⁴⁴ McLelland, “Why Our Pond Is Lukewarm,” 11.

⁴⁵ McLelland, “Why Our Pond Is Lukewarm,” 13.

⁴⁶ McLelland, “Why Our Pond Is Lukewarm,” 12.

but there isn't.... Christ is the missionary, his is the mission.... The only question is to what extent we participate in his mission."⁴⁷ As for what he liked to call "1925 and all that," he was just as blunt about what he called "our 40-year operation": "Isn't everyone tired of looking at all our scars and hearing about the surgery, or to change the metaphor, aren't people tired of hearing how we once defended our virtue and preserved our virginity?"⁴⁸

What McLelland and others active in the ecumenical movement were proposing was a radical restructuring of church and ministry that entailed a rescripting of the story Presbyterians had been telling since 1925 as a step toward recasting their identity. There were also differences between the Presbyterian "catholicity" advanced by David W. Hay and others active in the World and the Canadian Council of Churches and the "confessionalism" of W. Stanford Reid. Reid agreed with McLelland's bleak picture of the spiritual health of the Presbyterian Church but offered a different diagnosis. "We must now face the issue of whether we wish to continue as Presbyterians," Reid retorted, "or whether we are prepared to accept a revolutionary position which will largely eliminate our specifically reformed witness in favour of something much more general, in preparation for the next big church union movement."⁴⁹

There were indications that both churches were moving beyond the bitter controversy of 1925, yet that "next big church union" did not happen. Indeed, some of the same issues resurfaced fifty years later. An open letter signed by some of the most recognizable names in the two churches was published in June 1975 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Church. It called for reconciliation and urged that a committee be set up to study "the possibility of closer relations."⁵⁰ Two years later, the *Presbyterian Record* reported on promising proposals for mutual recognition of ministries that had gone forward for discussion by each denomination.⁵¹ But less than a year later, an editorial titled "Backward Christian Soldiers" announced the disappointing result: the General Assembly failed to move forward with the recommendations, despite the United Church's willingness to do so. The editorial blamed those opposed to it for picking at "old scar tissue" and "dragging old biases and fears" out of the cellar "like rusty relics from past battles" and displayed like "trophies."⁵² The plan seems to have reminded some in the Presbyterian Church of the old quarrels; the outcome reflected the persistence of old scripts that had been written decades earlier.

Conclusion

Nearly a century later, the identities scripted by and for the two sides during the controversy that preceded church union in 1925 have not been entirely erased. In comparison with Presbyterians, the United Church is still reputed to be comparatively theologically meagre but more broadminded, even when differences between them on such issues as remarriage of divorced persons, sexuality and gender (including the place of women in the church), climate change, and the legacy of residential schools have narrowed or disappeared over time. Meanwhile promoters of ecumenism in both denominations insist on the importance of proclaiming the Christian message to those

⁴⁷ McLelland, "Blueprint for a New Model," 10.

⁴⁸ McLelland, "Blueprint for a New Model," 11.

⁴⁹ W. Stanford Reid, "McLelland's Blueprint" [letters to the editor], *Presbyterian Record*, November 1967, 9.

⁵⁰ "A Call for Reconciliation," *Presbyterian Record*, June 1975, 2.

⁵¹ Decourcy H. Rayner, "Our Talks with the United Church," *Presbyterian Record*, October 1977, 3.

⁵² Editorial, "Backward Christian Soldier," *Presbyterian Record*, July/August 1978, 4.

outside the church and struggle with differentiating evangelism from proselytism in a pluralistic world.

Much has changed since 1925. Canadian churches now operate in a post-denominational context unlike the future imagined by either those for or against church union. “Presbyterian,” suggests Stuart Macdonald, “is no longer a brand that many in Canada identify with or possibly even recognize.”⁵³ A dramatic drop in Presbyterian membership as steep as that of the United Church happened despite the arrival of large numbers of immigrants who brought with them a more conservative theology and a robust approach to evangelism.⁵⁴ Macdonald notes that Korean immigrants do not identify with the “ethnically Canadian culture of the denomination”; not being in Canada to witness the boom years of the 1950s, what they see as a more accommodating approach is construed as “a path to ruin.”⁵⁵ To them the statistical erosion of recent decades tells a different story. Lament is one way to describe the disappointment of those who are unsure of their role in the current script.⁵⁶

Deepening fissures among Presbyterians in Canada make commonalities with their old rival more striking. For instance, the Presbyterian Church’s website affirms its commitment to ecumenism, identifying relationships with five church councils, all of which include the United Church, as well as social justice initiatives with ecumenical partners.⁵⁷ The two have moved closer on matters that once divided them. The United Church has come around to the position of mutual recognition of ministries that some Presbyterians had proposed as an alternative to church union a century earlier. The Presbyterian Church has broadened its approach to statements of faith by recognizing—along with the Westminster Confession of Faith—the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation (1955) as a subordinate standard.

More recently, the General Assembly received Living Faith (1984) as “an acceptable statement and as useful in both worship and study.”⁵⁸ Those who prepared the theological preamble to the United Church’s Basis of Union and subsequent theological statements would have wholeheartedly agreed with its opening words: “In every generation the church needs to confess its faith anew. That confession must at one and the same time be the ancient faith of the church and yet spoken into the mood and questions of its own time.”⁵⁹ A Song of Faith, the United Church’s most recent statement of faith, put the point more succinctly in 2006: “This is not a statement for all time but for *our* time.”⁶⁰

⁵³ Stuart Macdonald, “Presbyterian and Reformed Christians and Ethnicity,” in *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, eds. Paul Bramadat & David Seljak (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 198, n13.

⁵⁴ For a statistical analysis, see Brian Clarke & Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 33–57.

⁵⁵ Macdonald, “Presbyterian and Reformed Christians and Ethnicity,” 186.

⁵⁶ A recent example is A. Donald MacLeod, *A Presbyterian Requiem: A Canadian Pastor Reflects on Fifty Years of Ministry* (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2021).

⁵⁷ “Ecumenical Partners,” <https://presbyterian.ca/ecumenical-partners/>.

⁵⁸ “What We Believe,” <https://presbyterian.ca/about/more/>.

⁵⁹ “Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief,” The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1984, Introduction, p. 3.

⁶⁰ “A Song of Faith,” A Statement of Faith of The United Church of Canada L’Église Unie du Canada, 2006, 2.

Both statements reflect the rescripting of “world mission” that international ecumenism grappled with in the 1960s. “Mission is evangelism,”⁶¹ according to Living Faith, or as A Song of Faith puts it:

We are each given particular gifts of the Spirit.
For the sake of the world, ...⁶²

Both affirm a more direct and robust acknowledgement of religious pluralism. As Living Faith states:

Some whom we encounter belong to other religions
and already have a faith.
Their lives often give evidence of devotion
and reverence for life.
We recognize that truth and goodness in them
are the work of God's Spirit, the author of all truth.
We should not address others in a spirit of arrogance
implying that we are better than they.
But rather, in the spirit of humility,
as beggars telling others where food is to be found,
we point to life in Christ.⁶³

Compare that to A Song of Faith:

We sing of God the Spirit,
faithful and untameable,
who is creatively and redemptively active in the world.

The Spirit challenges us to celebrate the holy
not only in what is familiar,
but also in that which seems foreign.⁶⁴

The Presbyterian experience of rescription is a reminder that institutional identity is reflected in and shaped by the stories institutions tell about themselves, as well as by the stories told about them by others. They guide what churches do and with whom they do it. Such stories—and the theology that informs them through pamphlets, reports, statements of faith, and other publications—reflect who we are and, perhaps as significantly, who we hope to become.

⁶¹ “Living Faith,” 9.1.2, p. 26.

⁶² “A Song of Faith,” 8.

⁶³ “Living Faith,” 9.2.1, pp. 26–27.

⁶⁴ “A Song of Faith,” 5.

Reta Rank and the History of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Aurora

Robert Revington

In the days before St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Aurora, had its own hall, the church once held a Robbie Burns Night in the nearby Anglican church. Nonetheless, something truly *scandalous*—by Presbyterian standards—occurred that night. According to long-time church member Reta Rank, in that predominantly Scottish congregation, some church members “almost passed out” when they saw this horrifying sight. What was the scandal? When the bagpiper at the Robbie Burns Night walked out, it turned out that he was wearing a kilt ... with an *Irish* pattern! Perhaps more reasonably, Reta Rank recalls: “I thought if he can play a bagpipe, kilt or not, that was all that was necessary.”¹

That is just one of many memorable moments in Rank's time at the church. This essay focuses on Rank's life in the context of St. Andrew's, Aurora's history. Much of this material is derived from a 2021 museum exhibit on the 150th anniversary history of that church. This is not an exhaustive account, however, but more a series of vignettes that show how one particular Presbyterian church endured throughout the twentieth century. A recurring theme is the *resourcefulness* of the Presbyterians at the church in the face of adversity. Rank wrote a valuable autobiographical account of her time at the church for the church's archives. Her connection to the church covered almost all parts of her long life (1906–2005) and in that time she encountered most of the ministers in the church's history.

Reta Rank's Early Days in Aurora

Rank even has memories of the church's second minister, Rev. Walter Amos, who served the congregation from 1876 until 1912, when Rank was just six years old. She described Rev. Amos as “a very fine looking chap who dress [sic] in a frock coat, [and] black hat” whose “suits were always immaculate.”² She adds that “the main reason I liked him was because he had a lovely horse and buggy”—and sometimes took her on rides.³ She notes that “this was his transportation for him to call on his parishioners.”⁴ Although her family were originally Methodist, she writes that “at an early age I must have been destined to be a Presbyterian” because she grew up in the house beside the church's organist “Mrs. Watson” and would sometimes go to the church to listen to Watson practice.⁵

Rank remembers an experience when she was fourteen or fifteen years of age. She had been told to go to the church to check on the church's arthritic caretaker Amos Lloyd. Rank explains: “There had been complaints that he hadn't dusted the pews very well.”⁶ She narrates that “at this

¹ Reta Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Aurora, Archives, 8.

² Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 1.

³ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 1.

⁴ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 1.

⁵ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 1.

⁶ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 2.

time there was a back door in the old church, a sort of trap door. The steps went into the basement, a dirt floor and usually very damp. There was a Church shed that the folk tied their horses in.”⁷ Lloyd tripped and fell into this basement—which was flooded—and went “right down into it with me hanging onto his coat tail.”⁸ She concludes: “I pulled him out and a very soaking wet caretaker returned home.”⁹

Tales of Resourceful Presbyterians

Rank shares an amusing anecdote from the mid 1930s. The church used to be decorated with a fruit and vegetable display for Thanksgiving, which included many apples. Rank writes that “the old church had a board floor and evidently things dropped on it and resounded quite loud.” Their emphatic minister “Rev. Dix used to hit the pulpit occasionally I guess to bring something to the attention of the Congregation.” At that time, about 20 boys from St. Andrew’s College attended the church. One time, when Rev. Dix hit the pulpit while preaching, the apples flew off, hit about eight of the boys, and then landed on the floor. She reflects: “It really created quite a sound. Since then we always say no apples in the pulpit at Thanksgiving. The College boys had a glorious laugh along with the congregation.”¹⁰

This was a lighter moment, but in truth, the church had some hard times after 1925. Membership of St. Andrew’s, Aurora, grew to 175 by 1924.¹¹ Nonetheless, the year 1925 permanently changed St. Andrew’s, Aurora—as it did all Presbyterians in Canada. That year, two-thirds of Canadian Presbyterians merged with various Methodist and Congregationalist churches to form the United Church of Canada. In Aurora, the debate was bitter, as 71 people voted in favour of joining the United Church and 74 voted to stay Presbyterian.¹² The church stayed Presbyterian by just these three votes.

After church union, there are many stories in St. Andrew’s history of church members showing great resourcefulness and ingenuity in the face of adversity. For example, the Great Depression hit the congregation hard. Then-minister G. S. Eldridge even offered to contribute his own money to the cause—at \$25.00 each quarter and \$35.00 to cover the cost of an organist.¹³ Rank describes the 1930s as a time “when money was something very few had and was much needed in our church”—especially with church repairs and coal bills.¹⁴ She adds that “a ton of coal cost \$12.00,” but says that even that cost was difficult “to come by when we already had almost \$600.00 outstanding.”¹⁵ Rank elaborates that church members *were not allowed* to have euchre parties back then; evidently, it was too sinful.¹⁶ Nonetheless, they were allowed to play crokinole. They held crokinole tournaments—“12 tables at 25 cents per person”—to pay for

⁷ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 2.

⁸ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 2–3.

⁹ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 3.

¹⁰ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 6.

¹¹ G. Lloyd Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s: 1871–1996* (Aurora: St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, 1996), 9.

¹² Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s*, 9.

¹³ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s*, 16.

¹⁴ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 4.

¹⁵ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 4.

¹⁶ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 4.

coal.¹⁷ During the winter, the church members had one crokinole party per month to pay for the heating, with different people offering to host.¹⁸ That was how the church helped heat itself during the lean years of the 1930s.

She also remembers that in the 1930s, “there was no water in the church. It had to be carried in from the tap outside almost at the street. We filled wash boilers [and] heated them on an old cook stove to wash the dishes.”¹⁹ Still, she writes: “We were never afraid to try anything even though our church was small and the conveniences nil.”²⁰ One time, the choir from Parkdale Presbyterian Church visited and asked where they could find the washrooms for St. Andrew’s, Aurora. The church did not have any, so about 20 singers marched to the house of a family from the church: the Baldwin family.²¹ This experience brought home the fact that the church needed more facilities! Rank also recalls that after this concert, the visiting minister from Parkdale turned down all the wide variety of tarts, pies, and sandwiches he was offered for lunch, saying that “he much preferred a bowl of porridge.” He got his porridge anyway.²²

Rank remembers another time when a gentleman came to her house and wanted to hold two entertainment events for the church, dependent on if the women could take care of the hall and sell tickets. She refused to let the church hold a minstrel show, but it did host a play called *The Path Across the Hill*, by Lillian Mortimer. Unfortunately, some posters around town misidentified the play’s title as *The Path Across to Hell*. Perhaps on account of this more provocative title, Rank reflects, “believe me there was no difficulty selling the tickets and we had a full hall.”²³

In 1954, there was a great fire on Yonge Street in Aurora, which greatly damaged Thompson’s Furniture. Rank recalls: “It was January, cold and windy and the flames spread south.”²⁴ Yet because tickets had been sold, the Presbyterian church still had to host a roast beef dinner, even though the power was out all over Aurora. How could they prepare the meat? Rank writes that “Cora McDowell had a coal stove, Bea Dailey’s mother had a gas stove and a coal stove and Mrs. Noble ... had a cook stove. We carried roasts to all of them and the dinner was served at 6:30 p.m.”²⁵ This is not the only time the church found a creative solution to a problem.

The church organized strawberry social fundraisers throughout its history. Rank recalls a strawberry tea in 1924 that featured a band, with the event charging 40 cents for adults and 25 cents for children.²⁶ One time, when Rev. George M. Dix showed up to one of the church’s strawberry teas, a Miss McArthur told him to comb his hair immediately. Rank writes that “the ladies were horrified to tell the new Minister he needed to comb his hair.”²⁷ Strawberry teas took place on the church’s lawn with a table and on the east side of the Vestry there was “a coal oil stove to heat water for tea and to wash the dishes outside.”²⁸ On one June day, church members

¹⁷ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 4.

¹⁸ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 4–5.

¹⁹ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 5.

²⁰ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 6.

²¹ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 6.

²² Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 6.

²³ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 7.

²⁴ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 8.

²⁵ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 9.

²⁶ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 2.

²⁷ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 3.

²⁸ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 5.

prayed for good weather for the strawberry tea, but “it poured rain in the morning.”²⁹ The rain temporarily stopped, but the sky looked unpromising. She narrates that “just at that time Rev. John Locke the United Church minister and a former Presbyterian Mr. Ferris came by.” Rev. Locke cheekily told the Presbyterians that if they had gone United, the rain would not have come. Rank replied: “you haven’t got enough faith. Come back at 3 pm. The sun will be out and we will serve you strawberries on the lawn.”³⁰ She concludes: “Believe it or not they did come back and we did serve the tea on the lawn and I knew Mr. Ferris didn’t like strawberries so I had a jar of plums ready for him. There was [sic] about 150 served tea and all the dishes were washed outside.”³¹ Another time, the church could not find strawberries for its social and needed them soon. Then, Rank remembered “a place on the road into Midland” that sold them, but did not know its name.³² Rank showed some Presbyterian resourcefulness. She called the telephone operator and asked if the operator knew who sold berries in Midland, and, fortunately for the church, the operator did and rang them up. The church got two crates of berries, with 35 boxes per crate. Rank notes that her friend Lydia Baldwin “never quite got over that but when the tickets are sold you have to produce the merchandise.”³³

Rank also recalls how one night, Miss McArthur came to her door and told her it was now her responsibility to keep the church’s linen and to be in charge of its grape juice.³⁴ She adds: “My mother made the grape juice and we supplied the bread, washed and ironed the linen also all the glasses [sic]. We didn’t have a car so we carried these things down and back to the church until 1958.”³⁵

In 1937 and 1938, the church’s minister was Stanley Glen—a future principal of Knox College. Rank remembers how a church member named John G. MacDonald accidentally toppled all of the Communion bread during one service while Glen was praying, but they had to put it on the plate again. Most people in the church were not the wiser, although Rank says, “it was quite a job to keep a straight face.”³⁶

J. K. McCreary was St. Andrews’s minister from 1939 to 1940. Since at that time McCreary was a bachelor in his early thirties and apparently could not be expected to feed himself, Mr. and Mrs. Bond from the church “agreed to move into the manse and supply the minister with board and two rooms, the rent to be \$15.00 per month.”³⁷

S. W. Hirtle was the minister from 1941 to 1948. In Hirtle’s years, the church’s numbers had fallen and it was a three-point charge; he preached for Aurora, Richmond Hill, and Thornhill.³⁸ Hirtle lived in Richmond Hill, leaving the church to rent out its manse.³⁹ In 1948, St. Andrew’s, Aurora, returned to being a single charge; after Hirtle, the Belfast-born minister W. O. Mulligan was the church’s minister from 1948 to 1957.⁴⁰

²⁹ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 5.

³⁰ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 5.

³¹ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 5.

³² Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 5.

³³ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 5.

³⁴ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 3–4.

³⁵ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 4.

³⁶ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 7.

³⁷ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 7.

³⁸ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s*, 5; 9; Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 7.

³⁹ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 7.

⁴⁰ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s*, 5; 9

Times of Growth and Change

In a 1951 general meeting, the church chose to make an addition to the building: a hall was added to the church's north end, which still stands.⁴¹ Before adding its own hall, the church would rent the basement of the nearby Masonic Hall and other places.⁴² The church members had become tired of using other local spaces. As Rank writes, "we had \$9,000.00 thereabouts and decided we were tired of carrying tables 15 ft. long on express wagons from the Wells St. school, the Masonic Hall, the Anglican Hall, the Mechanics Hall [and] the Odd fellows Hall, that it was time for us to get our own hall even if it was only four walls, a ceiling and a couple of washrooms [and] also a kitchen."⁴³ The women were integral to building the church hall, as the Ladies Aid contributed \$4,000.00 to the cause.⁴⁴ Before then, the church "had a tiny little kitchen," with a tap but "no sink for the dishes ... just a floor drain under the table."⁴⁵ They used a funnel to get rid of the dishwater. One time, a woman named Mossie Malloy accidentally knocked over the wash tub and boiler during a Lions Club event while the speaker was talking.⁴⁶

In 1961, Louis H. Fowler became the church's minister and held the post until 1967.⁴⁷ By the time he came to St. Andrew's, Aurora, he had more than thirty years' experience in the ministry. Fowler wrote multiple books and at various times was the Deputy Clerk and Principal Clerk of the Presbyterian Church in Canada's General Assembly.⁴⁸ Rank notes that when Fowler came to the church "he figured this was a small charge and he wanted to write a book."⁴⁹ She asks "how far off could he have been" because "by this time we wanted a new church."⁵⁰ As Fowler himself put it in an interview years later, "I thought I'd like to take a small charge and maybe do some writing, which, incidentally, hasn't been done ... In six months I found I had been completely had."⁵¹ By the time Fowler arrived, the old 1873 building was now "structurally unsound," so the congregation decided to get a new building.⁵² When the church asked for a loan from the Bank of Montreal for the new building, the bank manager Dan Bowerman told Fowler, "The head office thinks that you people have bitten off more than you can chew."⁵³ Fowler thanked the manager and told him, "that's all we Presbyterians need to hear, something to make us angry, and we'll be on our way."⁵⁴

To pay for the new building, the church sold bonds to its members.⁵⁵ Furthermore, in April 1962, the Church placed a remarkably passive-aggressive advertisement in the local newspaper

⁴¹ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew's*, 16.

⁴² Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 8.

⁴³ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 9–10.

⁴⁴ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew's*, 19.

⁴⁵ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 8.

⁴⁶ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 8.

⁴⁷ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew's*, 5.

⁴⁸ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew's*, 5.

⁴⁹ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 10.

⁵⁰ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 10.

⁵¹ John Lott, "Pastor Was First to Snooze in the Pews," *The Banner*, 7 December 1977, A1.

⁵² Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew's*, 10.

⁵³ Lott, "Pastor Was First to Snooze in the Pews," A2.

⁵⁴ Lott, "Pastor Was First to Snooze in the Pews," A2.

⁵⁵ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew's*, 16.

the *Banner*—likely written by Fowler.⁵⁶ The ad targeted Presbyterians who were not active in the church. Although the advertisement claimed that its purpose was “not to solicit funds,” it stated:

This letter is to afford an opportunity to those Presbyterians we have named to fulfill their obligations to their Church, and thus to discharge their conscience in obedience to the faith they have professed. As the Scripture states, faith without works is dead ... We therefore, through this advertisement, give the call of the Parish to those of our obedience with whom previously we have not been in touch that they may respond as their conscience, if a true conscience, may direct.⁵⁷

Not long after, a United Church member “said he liked the Presbyterians’ spirit, and handed over a \$500.00 cheque.”⁵⁸ Fowler and Ralph Rank took apart the old church’s organ—laying out all of its 300 pipes and wires—and then put it back together for the new sanctuary before it opened.⁵⁹ Fowler had “a slight quiver” before he tested the organ.⁶⁰ Fowler was exhausted at this time, and a member of the congregation took a picture of him sleeping in one of the pews.⁶¹ Later, Fowler joked: “In the history of Christianity, I defy you to find a single example where the minister was the first to go to sleep in his own pew.”⁶² He added: “Quite a few have gone to sleep since.”⁶³

When the dedication of the new church building approached, the church had run out of money for a carpet in the sanctuary.⁶⁴ Reta Rank asked how much it would cost, and a member of the committee told her it would be \$1,000.00.⁶⁵ Rank reasoned that “that is just 100 people at \$10 each.” As such, she recalls that “by the end of the evening my Mom came up with \$10, Bill Case, Lola’s husband handed me \$10, my girl friend produced \$10” and “at the end of the week I had \$99.00.”⁶⁶ She entered the carpet store and said, “Well! There is the first hundred all but \$1.00.” Then, a nearby Jewish traveller told her, “if you are that sold on whatever you are collecting for here is the other \$1.00.”⁶⁷ Since Wyatt and Lydia Baldwin from the church were leaving for vacation, Rank asked if she could hold a “carpet party” fundraiser in their home.⁶⁸ A local chef named Walter Ramsden decorated the Baldwin family’s living room table. The Presbyterians “placed a large glass bowl at the door with \$10.00 and \$20.00 [and] nothing less than a \$5.00.” She writes that “the people were lined up down Mosley St. ... They had never heard of a carpet party ... neither had we.” Near the end of the day, Rev. Fowler told her, “don’t be disappointed if you don’t make the \$1,000.00.” Rank says: “I told him to count the money and that he hadn’t enough faith. There was \$1,025.00. We had a total of \$1,300.00 or close when it

⁵⁶ “St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church—Aurora,” *The Banner*, 19 April 1962, 8.

⁵⁷ “St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church—Aurora,” 8.

⁵⁸ Lott, “Pastor Was First to Snooze in the Pews,” A2.

⁵⁹ Lott, “Pastor Was First to Snooze in the Pews,” A2; cf. Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s*, 10.

⁶⁰ Lott, “Pastor Was First to Snooze in the Pews,” A2.

⁶¹ Lott, “Pastor Was First to Snooze in the Pews,” A1.

⁶² Lott, “Pastor Was First to Snooze in the Pews,” A1–2.

⁶³ Lott, “Pastor Was First to Snooze in the Pews,” A2.

⁶⁴ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 10. For the account that follows, cf. Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s*, 20.

⁶⁵ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 10.

⁶⁶ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 10.

⁶⁷ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 11.

⁶⁸ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 11.

was finished. The rug went down the day before the Church was opened. Again I say you can accomplish almost anything if you try. Everyone shared in that project ... even some old Presbyterians from 25 years back.”⁶⁹ The full-day fundraiser included coffee in the morning, an afternoon tea, an apron sale, and a buffet dinner for 100 people.⁷⁰ The fundraiser was enough for the church to have its blue broadloom carpet ready for the dedication day.⁷¹ The story of this “carpet party” was later dramatized in a 2003 play on the church’s history, which was performed on its anniversary Sunday and written by the previous editor of the Canadian Society of Presbyterian History; Reta Rank was portrayed by a young woman named Amy Chapman and Fowler by Robert Hayashi.⁷²

In 1971, the church celebrated its 100th anniversary. Former minister Stanley Glen returned to Aurora to serve as the guest speaker for the 100th Anniversary Service. To commemorate the anniversary, members of the church tried to imitate the way people had lived 100 years earlier. Rev. McAvoy and many of the men in the church grew beards, while the women dressed in centennial dresses and bonnets.⁷³ Some church members visited the minister’s house and had desserts using 100 year old recipes.⁷⁴

Tragically, Rev. McAvoy died in early 1975. That same year, he was chosen as Aurora’s Citizen of the Year. The loss of such a popular and charismatic minister was a great blow to St. Andrew’s. McAvoy’s wife Elizabeth would later remarry, and her second husband—Gordon Beaton—become the minister in Aurora in 1995. Other ministers since McAvoy include Alex McDonald, Gunnar Kravalis, Mitch McVeigh, Matthew McKay, Dennis Wright, and currently, Soong Huh.

The church catered for local events throughout its history, including a turkey dinner for a local golf club and, for 35 years, Lions Club events.⁷⁵ For events at the Mechanics Hall across from the church, they had to carry dishes across the street after cooking them in the church.⁷⁶ One time, the event had more people than it was supposed to and they had to send George Baldwin into the snow to go home for more potatoes.⁷⁷ Another time the church provided the food for a banquet at Wells St. Public School for a board of trade; they carried the dishes for the turkey dinner from the church and nearby Masonic Hall. They discovered that the turkey they had bought smelled terrible but they had to serve it anyway; Rank was amazed the audience did not become ill.⁷⁸

At an earlier time, on one occasion, church member Walter Wood asked the women of the church to supply the food for a ploughing match at his farm. A ploughing match is a contest between people ploughing a field. The women provided ham, pie, and coffee. Rank and others

⁶⁹ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 11.

⁷⁰ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s*, 20.

⁷¹ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s*, 20.

⁷² Kate Revington, “Heritage Sunday, November 2, 2003,” Church Play, St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Aurora, 2003.

⁷³ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s*, 11.

⁷⁴ Watson, *The Story of St. Andrew’s*, 11.

⁷⁵ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 8.

⁷⁶ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 8.

⁷⁷ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 9.

⁷⁸ Rank, “Memories of the Presbyterian Church,” 9.

rode on a wagon over the fields to distribute hot coffee from a milk can and give lunch to the ploughers. Later, they served dinner, although one of the stoves blew up.⁷⁹

The church also had a long affiliation with the Scouts in Aurora (and similarly, the Explorers) along with other children's organizations—including the Canadian Girls in Training, St. Andrew's Spirits, Children of the Church (C.O.C), T.T.F., and Sigma C.⁸⁰ The church formed the C.O.C. for children ages five to seven, and then started the Explorers for the children who turned eight.⁸¹ She notes that "the children served an afternoon tea" and "the Explorers sold candy."⁸² The C.O.C. and Explorers' fundraising and collections helped the church and various mission projects.⁸³ They helped pay for tea pots, kettles, trays, a communion set, the light in front of the church, a lamp, 20 Bibles, a rug for the upstairs room, and a settee for the minister's study.⁸⁴ They did their own Christmas program and banquet.⁸⁵ Rank concludes: "I sometimes wonder if anyone really knows what children can do."⁸⁶

Conclusion

In February 1975, at the end of Homer McAvoy's last sermon, he said: "When this church was built, the contractor made all the doors open outward. I suppose this was for fire regulations. But to me it is symbolic. The Church's doors open outward so that by the Christian stewardship of concerned people the Bread of life can be given to all people."⁸⁷ When this sermon was printed, the anonymous epilogue asked: "Can we pick up the challenge of his example?"⁸⁸ In the words of the 2003 dramatization of the church's history, "sometimes, the voice of the congregation has swelled, as in the early 1920s and late 50s and 60s," but "sometimes, the voice has dropped to a dry whisper."⁸⁹ Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald identify 1962—coincidentally, the year St. Andrew's, Aurora, built its new sanctuary—as a time when the churches in Canada were in a strong position, just before the decline came.⁹⁰ And indeed, this church has shrunk considerably since then. Even so, since 1871, in times of prosperity and times of weakness, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Aurora, has been a fixture in the community. Ultimately, throughout the life of Reta Rank, even in frugal times, again and again the congregation managed to achieve great things because of the creativity and resourcefulness of people of all ages.

⁷⁹ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 7.

⁸⁰ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 11–13.

⁸¹ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 11.

⁸² Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 11.

⁸³ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 12–13.

⁸⁴ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 13.

⁸⁵ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 13.

⁸⁶ Rank, "Memories of the Presbyterian Church," 13.

⁸⁷ Homer McAvoy, *A Memorial Tribute to Dr. Homer McAvoy: His Sermons on the Lord's Prayer* (Aurora, ON: St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, 1975), 27.

⁸⁸ "Epilogue," in Homer McAvoy, *A Memorial Tribute to Dr. Homer McAvoy: His Sermons on the Lord's Prayer* (Aurora, ON: St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, 1975), 28.

⁸⁹ Revington, "Heritage Sunday, 4.

⁹⁰ Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 4.

“1966 and All That”: The Liberty of Conscience Debate (1979–1982) in Context Stuart Macdonald

In the lead up to the 1979 General Assembly something different had happened. This was one of the developments the new editor—James Ross Dickey—commented upon in his report on General Assembly in the June/July issue of the *Presbyterian Record* that year. Dickey noted, “No less than TEN Overtures were directed to this Assembly” on this one issue; later he concluded, “As far as can be determined the accumulation of ten overtures all addressed to the same subject was unprecedented, at least in recent Presbyterian history.”¹ Those with some knowledge of the history of the Presbyterian Church in Canada would assume that this would be the beginning of what has come to be known as the liberty of conscience debate—the second, and more contentious, debate related to the decision to ordain women as ministers and elders in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. However, this would be mistaken. These overtures were about a completely different issue; indeed, a controversy that is no longer remembered. At the same time, the timing of this controversy and the seemingly new tactic of a flurry of overtures, and the similarity with what happened just two years later, suggests we need to look closely at what happened. It also invites us to place the debate on the ordination of women within the Presbyterian Church in Canada into a larger context, and to therefore see it in that context.

The decision to ordain women—allowing them to serve as elders on sessions and as ministers—was one of the most significant decisions the Presbyterian Church in Canada took in the post-war period. Discussions on the place of women and ordination began in the mid-1950s, but proved inconclusive.² The Place of Women committee was reinvigorated in the early 1960s and produced the important study guide “Putting Woman in Her Place” and the General Assembly made the decision to ordain women as both ruling elders (members of sessions, and thus also eligible to serve at presbytery, synods, and General Assembly), and teaching elders (Ministers of Word and Sacrament). While there were dissents at the 1966 General Assembly, this did not become at that specific moment the source of controversy and division that came later. Indeed, it was a little over a decade later that this emerged as the major issue that seemed to divide the denomination. This issue dominated three of four General Assemblies (c.1979 to c. 1982) and is, as noted, generally referred to as the liberty of conscience debate.

The gap between the decision to ordain women in 1966 and this later controversy has been puzzling. Some have suggested this is a pattern we see in other denominations in other countries

¹ J.R. Dickey, *Presbyterian Record*, July/August 1979, 8. Capitalization as in the original.

² The early years of the discussion on the place of women in the church have been discussed in Peter Bush, “The Opening of the Women’s Ordination Debate in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1952–1957,” *Presbyterian History* 60, no 2 (2016): 1–6 and Stuart Macdonald, “What Were They Thinking? The Place of Women and the 1966 Decisions on Ordination,” *Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Paper* 2016, 16–30. The second stage of the debate is the focus of Jo-Ann Dickson, “Testing 1966: Unrest in Montreal,” in *Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Paper* 2012, 43–55 and is central in A. Donald MacLeod, “From Reaction to Renewal: Presbyterian Renewal Fellowship, 1979–1987,” in *Studies in Canadian Evangelical Renewal: Essays in Honour of Ian S. Rennie*, eds. Kevin Quast and John Vissers (Markham: FT Publications, 1996), 175–194.

who have also made the decision to ordain women. While an interesting observation, I am unaware of any studies that have explored this. Instead, other suggestions related to the distance between the decision and the later conflict have been offered. Don MacLeod, in his article on the origins of the Renewal Fellowship suggests several reasons for the delay, including a fear of following a divisive course on the part of those who disagreed with the 1966 decision.³ Jo-Ann Dickson, in a paper presented to this society in 2012, drew attention to the increasing number of women moving into ministry in the late 1970s, and in particular the challenge that this created at the Mission Board given that all moving into congregational ministry needed to be placed under the Ordained Missionary appointment system. She documents the tensions between the Mission Board and the students of Presbyterian College which led to a memorial coming to the 1979 General Assembly raising the issue of the discrimination women moving into ministry were facing.⁴ In a paper presented to this society in 2016 on the 1966 decision, I argued that the most immediate result of the decision made in 1966 was to allow for women to be elders. I also suggested that in 1966 few on either side seem to have anticipated that a significant number of women might wish to become ministers. When this did happen, as Jo-Ann Dickson and others have shown had happened by the late 1970s, this created a new and quite different situation, and suggested that this may be the reason that there was conflict at that particular historical moment.⁵

We thus have some developing ideas as to why tensions on the issue of women's ordination surfaced so dramatically in the late 1970s and early 1980s. To attempt a clearer understanding, it seems the best course is to go back over the details of what happened and when. This involves looking at the different General Assemblies from 1979 through to 1982 and the issues that came before them. This also involves considering the overtures which were sent, in particular to the 1981 General Assembly, and the "Report of the Task Force on Liberty of Conscience" presented to the 1982 General Assembly. This latter report is significant and too often overlooked for what it says about the understandings of the issues at the time, including where there was consensus and where there were disagreements. Having focused internally on the denomination and its debates, the paper will conclude by placing these events in a larger context. Even at this preliminary stage of investigation, it is clear that it was not only the issue of the place of women in the church (usually defined as the ordination of women) that was dividing Presbyterians in this period. This was one of several issues, though the one most frequently remembered. Denominations are never insulated from the cultural debates of the societies in which they find themselves. There are times when those cultural debates are particularly intrusive and divisive. This may have been one of those times.

Origins: 1979, Before and After the General Assembly

In early 1979 a controversy developed between the Mission Board and the graduating students at Presbyterian College in Montreal. As already noted, JoAnn Dickson has explored this in detail; it is, nevertheless, important to remind ourselves of some of these events. At that time graduating students were not allowed to seek a call independently but, in order to be ordained, were required to take a placement under the Ordained Missionary (OM) appointment system. The system was overseen by the Board of World Mission, but with significant input from the regional mission superintendents. While graduating students were allowed to indicate three possible choices from a

³ MacLeod, "From Reaction to Renewal," 179.

⁴ Dickson, "Testing 1966," 43–55.

⁵ Macdonald, "What Were They Thinking?" 27–28.

common list, female graduating students were restricted in which congregations they might be placed (something that did not apply to male graduating students). In response to this process, a telegram and petition was sent to the Superintendents of Mission of the denomination on March 2, 1979 protesting the “prejudice experienced by women in the appointment process.” A follow up letter was sent four days later requesting another meeting with the mission superintendents and a review of “possible appointments with reference to sex.”⁶

This issue was raised at the Presbytery of Montreal at its March 13 meeting. Out of this presbytery meeting came Memorial 1 from the presbytery of Montreal to the General Assembly relating to “Place of Women in the Church.” This memorial argued that despite the fact that “the ordination of women to the eldership and to the ministry was enacted into the law of the church” at the 1966 General Assembly, women were still “experiencing discrimination and prejudice at all levels of church life.” The text of the memorial detailed the denomination’s decision and goal of equality of men and women before moving on to contrast that with the reality of continuing discrimination. As a remedy, the memorial called for education to remind everyone of what the church had decided, a change in attitudes (both related to women as ministers and women as ruling elders), and finally, a “modification of the church’s language and terminology, both oral and written, on all church bodies, so as not to be exclusive of women.” Particular attention was drawn to church law (the Book of Forms), worship (the Book of Common Order), and hymnody (the Book of Praise).⁷ At the General Assembly the memorial was received (despite the fact that it was deemed not to be in proper form) and it was recommended that a Special Committee be named by the moderator to study the issues raised in the memorial and report to the next General Assembly. The committee was appointed with Irene Dickson as convener, a male and a female minister, and a male and a female elder, who would serve alongside representatives of each of the theological Colleges, the Board of Ministry, and the Board of World Mission.⁸

Issues related to the place of women in the church had led to the creation of a committee in June 1979 at the General Assembly, and these arose out of the placement of female graduates from the denomination’s theological colleges, Presbyterian College (Montreal) in particular. The practice of the church was deemed to be out of step with what the denomination had decided in 1966. This was the origin of the discussion that began in 1979 and continued at the 1980 General Assembly. In the historiography, as well as in popular memories, another event has overshadowed this and come to be seen instead as what lay at the root of the controversy in this period: the refusal of the Board of Ministry to accept a graduate from a theological college outside of the denomination.

In the spring of 1979, a student from Bridlewood Presbyterian Church in Toronto, Daniel MacDougall, graduated from Westminster Theological College in Philadelphia. As was church policy at the time for students who had studied at a theological college other than the two denominational colleges (Knox College and Presbyterian College), the candidate needed to be approved by the Board of Education. Although he had already been appointed by the Board of World Mission to serve a congregation in British Columbia, the Board of Education did not approve of his candidacy because of his unwillingness to participate in the ordination of women. The student’s home congregation nevertheless requested at the September 11, 1979 meeting of the presbytery of East Toronto that his ordination take place; the presbytery declined by a close vote

⁶ Dickson, “Testing 1966,” 43–46. Dickson explores other elements of this story in her fine article.

⁷ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1979, 466–467.

⁸ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1979, 26, 33. Overture 31, dealing with Graduating Student appointments, also appeared at this General Assembly. It is not clear that this was related other than indicating the issue of graduating students and that their appointment was a matter of concern in the denomination at the time.

of 50 to 47. This decision was appealed, first to the Synod of Toronto and Kingston, and then to the 1980 General Assembly.⁹ It was the appeal of the candidate for “liberty of conscience” in this matter that has given its name to the debates in this period. It is worth pausing and recognizing the issue of discrimination faced by women in the placement of candidates by the denomination would have been before the 1980 Assembly as a result of the committee established in 1979 to respond to the request of the presbytery of Montreal. At the same time, the appeal of the decision not to ordain Dan MacDougall, not only also appeared before the 1980 Assembly but also meant that the issue of “liberty of conscience” would frame the debate, pushing aside the issues of discrimination experienced by female candidates for ministry.

Controversy: The 1980 and 1981 General Assemblies

Denominational divisions were clear in the lead up to the 1980 General Assembly. The decision of the presbytery of East Toronto not to ordain the candidate (Dan MacDougall) led to four overtures (or five, if one counts an overture calling for the suspension of the Ordained Missionary Appointment system from the presbytery of Miramichi which also sent in one of the overtures asking for “Freedom of Conscience”), and one memorial.¹⁰ During the Assembly, a Special Committee was created to deal with the four overtures, memorial, and the appeal. In the end, the Special Committee’s recommendations affirmed the decision taken by the denomination in 1966 and declared that the ordination of women was part of the doctrine of the church, and thus liberty of conscience did not apply in this case. The committee thus concluded that participation at ordinations was not an option, but was required of all in the church; however, the committee did allow an exception in the case of Dan MacDougall and instructed the presbytery to license him (the necessary action required if he was to be ordained by a different presbytery). No further exceptions were to be made. The Special Committee finally determined that those within the denomination might be “excused from participation” in the ordination of women “for a period of ten years” as long as they co-operated with all ministers and abstained from “prejudicing their people against the election of women to the ruling and teaching eldership.” These motions were printed in the *Presbyterian Record*, which noted that, although there was debate, they passed by normal vote.¹¹ The result pleased neither side, either at the General Assembly, or in the months that followed.

This division can clearly be seen in the thirteen memorials (followed by an additional three memorials), two petitions (and one additional) and twenty-three (or twenty-seven, depending on how one counts) overtures which were sent to the General Assembly before the 1981 meeting. The overtures came from presbyteries and congregations across Canada. Like many others, Overture 5 from St. Paul’s Church in Woodstock, New Brunswick, objected to the ten year period that had been laid out by the previous General Assembly. They asked that this be removed, as they were concerned that this would “affect the ministry of Ministers in our Church who do not agree that the ordination of women is in accordance with the scriptures” and that those “who cannot support such a ruling” might leave before the ten year period had expired.¹² Overture 8 from the presbytery

⁹ These details are taken from MacLeod, “From Reaction to Renewal,” 177.

¹⁰ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1980. Overture 3, from the Synod of Toronto and Kingston, 452. Overture 5, Session of Bridlewood Church, and Overture 10, Session of Knox Church, 453–454. Overture 29 and Overture 30, Presbytery of Miramichi, 462–463. Memorial 1 — Presbytery of East Toronto, 466–467.

¹¹ *Presbyterian Record*, July–August 1980, 12–14.

¹² *Acts and Proceedings*, 1981, Overture 5, 463.

of Vancouver Island, among other issues, raised the experience of the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. where it claimed “action of a similar nature has caused widespread divisions and concern.”¹³ Other church courts challenged whether Assembly had acted correctly when it placed ordination “in the category of being of the essence of the Gospel,” and whether this was appropriate given the subordinate standards of the denomination.¹⁴ The congregation of St. Andrew’s, Virden stated that they were “opposed to being deprived after 1990 of a ministry in harmony with our convictions.” The congregation also opposed “the present restriction being placed upon ministers which forbids them to speak out before their people against the election of women to the ruling and teaching eldership,” rejecting the notion that ministers could not speak against what had been decided by the denomination in 1966. After listing a series of other objections, the overture concluded with the suggestion that the General Assembly reconsider its decision and refer it to the presbyteries “in the hope of producing a more mature and adequate decision.” The optimism that presbyteries might do as the congregation wished seemed ill placed, as the presbytery of Brandon did not support this overture, but simply passed it on *simpliciter* (without comment).¹⁵

But not all of the overtures asked the denomination to reconsider its decision; indeed, there were overtures (as well as memorials) supporting not only the decision taken in 1966 but also the decision of the last General Assembly in 1980. The Presbytery of Newfoundland, for example, spoke of the gifts women ministers and elders had brought to the church and then asked the denomination to “uphold the law” of the church and “enjoin upon ministers, elders and officebearers respect for and obedience to this law.”¹⁶ In Overture 11 the Presbytery of Halifax-Lunenburg made similar arguments, denied that liberty of conscience applied in this situation, and suggested that not participating in the ordination of women “can only constitute the denigration of the role of women in the church.”¹⁷ The divisions in the church were clear, as was also evident in the overture sent from Knox Church, Toronto, protesting the decision of Knox College to prohibit students from doing their theological field education placement at their congregation and the Board of World Mission for questioning students from the congregation regarding their views on the ordination of women. The session suggested the college did not have the right to “adjudicate what congregations are in good faith with The Presbyterian Church in Canada and therefore qualify to have their students posted to them for credits in field education” and that the Board had also surpassed its authority.¹⁸ Given the amount of contention in the denomination, it was not surprising that a Task Force was established at the 1981 General Assembly to consider the issues raised by the various memorials, petitions and overtures, and report back to the next General Assembly. Between the 1981 and 1982 General Assemblies, a further issue emerged when the presbytery of Montreal rejected a call from a congregation to a minister, one of the signatories to the 1980 dissent, the Rev. John Vaudry.¹⁹ The ordination of women had become a deeply divisive issue; indeed, far more divisive, it seems, than when the decision was made in 1966.

¹³ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1981, Overture 8, 464.

¹⁴ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1981, Overture 14, St. Andrews Islington and Overture 15, St. Andrew’s, King City, 466–467.

¹⁵ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1981, Overture 18, St. Andrew’s, Virden (MB), 468–469.

¹⁶ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1981, Overture 19, Presbytery of Newfoundland, 469.

¹⁷ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1981, Overture 11, Presbytery of Halifax-Lunenburg, 465.

¹⁸ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1981, Overture 25, Session, Knox, Toronto, 472–473.

¹⁹ MacLeod, “From Reaction to Renewal,” 182.

Report of the Task Force on Liberty of Conscience, 1982

The 1982 General Assembly was key. The “Task Force on Liberty of Conscience as it pertains to the Ordination of Women” appointed at the 1981 Assembly was chaired by Margaret Taylor and represented the theological diversity of the church. There were twenty members (two by correspondence) on the Task Force alongside the convenor, and seven (including the convenor) were women. The Task force met three times (a total of seven days) over six months seeking “unanimity.” At the third meeting a minority report signed by six members was received related to the issue of active participation in the ordination service. After the issue of “exemption” from participation was raised, the committee met for a further two days to discuss this central issue. The end result was a report with recommendations, which was followed by a minority report. The committee also included an appendix of supportive material. The committee’s report was carefully structured and looked at the context of the denomination’s decision to ordain women, the denomination’s doctrine of ministry, the concept of liberty of conscience and specifically how this related to the ordination of women, and the issue of ecclesiastical authority, before turning to the issue of whether individuals could exempt themselves, or be allowed to exempt themselves, from attending any minister’s ordination. This was, as noted, followed by the recommendations.

The Biblical basis on which the church made its decision in 1966 to ordain women as ministers and elders was affirmed—indeed the “entire task force” declared itself in agreement that this “corporate decision” needed to be respected. As there were different Biblical texts that could be referenced there had been a “need for clarification” which required study. The committee noted that “quoting text against text” did not resolve anything, but instead concluded: “while recognizing the diversity of witness in Scripture the church arrived at a decision concerning the ordination of women, a decision based on the intention of the whole Biblical witness and the revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ heard in Scripture.” The value of this “corporate interpretation” was strongly affirmed.²⁰ The committee then turned to consider the understanding of the denomination’s doctrine of ministry, with specific references being made to the Westminster Confession of Faith and to the theology of John Calvin and then concluded: “It is into the one ministry of Christ that men and women are called and ordained by the Lord through the Spirit in the Church, and they have no ministry of their own which they individually may define.”²¹ This theme of the corporate nature of ministry continued as the committee discussed ordination of ministers and elders. The Task Force was clear:

Since 1966 the Presbyterian Church in Canada has affirmed that the ministry of Christ in all its aspects and offices is exercised by both men and women. Theologically and spiritually speaking, there are not male and female ministers or elders, there are only ministers or elders. The Church spiritually, does not ordain a female or a male, it ordains elders and minister!²²

The Task Force noted that this had been reaffirmed by actions of the two previous General Assemblies. The distinction being made by those who wished not to be present at the ordination

²⁰ “Report of the Task Force on Liberty of Conscience as it Pertains to the Ordination of Women” (hereafter “Report”), 1 and 2. The Report was published as a booklet: the copy in the Caven Library, Knox College, is used in this paper. The “Report” also appeared in the *Acts and Proceedings*, 1982, 501–515. The Pamphlet includes Supportive Material, which is extremely helpful.

²¹ “Report,” 4.

²² “Report,” 5.

of anyone based on their sex was thus being rejected. To disagree with the ordination of anyone, in this scenario based on sex, was to challenge in the denomination's understanding of the Church's doctrine of ministry.²³ This point continued to be stressed as the committee returned to a consideration of Calvin's understanding of ministers and elders in the church, as well as the understandings represented in church law (the Book of Forms), and reasserted the understanding that there was only one ministry. The consequences of this were made clear: "Were the Church to legislate exemptions for elders or ministers from sharing in the ministry of ordaining women it would destroy the oneness of the office of elder and minister and divide them into two orders — one order that ordains women and one order that does not."²⁴ The committee rejected this as bringing disharmony to the church and as contrary to the denomination's understanding of its doctrine. Having explored the issue of Scripture and doctrine, the Task Force then turned to the specific issue of liberty of conscience.

The Task Force focused their discussion of liberty of conscience on Chapter XX of the Westminster Confession of Faith. As they noted, this "statement on 'liberty of conscience' is unique" in the development of Reformed confessions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and thus, they argued, needed to be understood within its historical context. The Task Force attempted to do this, noting the tension between what this section seemed to state and the other understandings of the Westminster Divines: "they certainly did not envisage the individual minister being at liberty to exercise ministry as he or she determines in the light of conscience,"²⁵ the Task Force clarified, before concluding that the "heart of the problem" they faced was "the apparent conflict between the authority of God over the conscience and the authority of the Church."²⁶ They then turned to what they considered an analogous situation, the sacrament of baptism, and concluded that as long as the church practices the baptism of infants, every minister, regardless of personal conscience, was "obligated to participate" (more accurately lead) in that sacrament. This being noted, the Task Force turned to a more specific exploration of this issue related to the specific issue of the ordination of women. The church decided in 1966, it was noted, that women could be ordained:

The equality of status granted to women is now entrenched in the law and doctrine of the Church, and demands a corresponding equality of treatment in the whole life and work of the Church. This precludes all forms of discrimination and any false distinction based solely on the sex of the candidate.²⁷

In case this was not clear, the point was hammered home: no provision was made in 1966 for "exemption" from participation, no one in 1966 who dissented from the decision had requested any such exemption, nor had anyone requested this prior to 1980. After stating that any such request would undermine the decision taken in 1966, the committee noted in a parenthetical comment that "suggestions sometimes made that the 1966 legislation was somehow only 'permissive' or 'enabling' have no legal sanction whatever."²⁸ A clear course of action was already possible, it was suggested, for anyone who disagreed and wished to "assuage one's conscience

²³ "Report," 5.

²⁴ "Report," 6.

²⁵ "Report," 7.

²⁶ "Report," 7.

²⁷ "Report," 8.

²⁸ "Report," 8.

before God”—namely, one could register one’s dissent. This could and should be done, but one was then not allowed to “opt out” or seek the right to do so, for they were “seeking the ‘freedom to disobey’ the doctrine and polity of the church.”²⁹ This point was made in several different ways, but the Task Force argued that any “refusal to participate,” given that this was the law of the church, was detrimental to the “authority of the Church and results in a form of ecclesiastical anarchy.”³⁰ Dissent was allowed. One could attempt to reverse decisions made by Church courts. But any such change “must be sought by means of lawful process through petitions and overtures.”³¹ Chapter XX of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Task Force was arguing, was not applicable in this situation. What is intriguing is that the other way in which the term “liberty of conscience” was used in the Presbyterian Church in Canada was not noted.

The text of the Task Force’s report suggests that there was consensus on all of these matters. Where the committee divided was whether it was possible to offer exemptions to those who disagreed with the decision in 1966 and whether to allow individuals to not participate at the ordinations of female ministers or elders. It was here that the majority divided from the minority, and their views can be seen respectively in the report itself and in the “Minority Report.” The report of the committee is clear that by the third regular meeting of the committee it was evident that there would be dissents from the report on this issue. Different sources from those previously cited appear at this point. The committee—and the minority on the committee—were no longer looking at the Westminster Confession and Calvin’s writings, but the lived experience of the Canadian Presbyterian church and of other churches.

The committee laid out seven points it believed were crucial. First, it argued that providing any legislation or agreement which would allow people to not participate at an ordination would be a “retreat” from what the church decided in 1966. Here the committee noted that no church it was aware of had retroactively allowed this exemption. They did note two denominations, the Reformed Church in America and the Anglican Church of Canada, which had allowed for exemptions “*at the time they enacted the original legislation to ordain women*” (italics in the original), but argued that neither situation provided a positive model or was applicable to the Presbyterian Church in Canada’s experience. Indeed, in the case of the Anglican Church of Canada, the committee argued that this had “created a most difficult if not intolerable situation for many women candidates and priests” as there were specific diocese where women could not be ordained or serve.³² Second, the committee argued that allowing exemptions would “cast doubt upon the validity” of the ordinations of women that had already, or would, occur. The committee’s third point was that allowing an exemption after sixteen years was contrary to, and dangerous to, the presbyterian approach to church law. Not only would such an act “distort our doctrine of ministry” (the fourth point), the committee also argued it would not bring peace to the denomination (fifth point). The committee then argued that such an exemption might specifically discriminate against women being elected as elders in congregations where the minister had asked for an exemption, before making the concluding argument that such a step was unnecessary as there was already a mechanism to deal with one’s conscience—namely, dissent. The committee quickly noted, “Dissent never permits non-participation.”³³

²⁹ “Report,” 9.

³⁰ “Report,” 9.

³¹ “Report,” 9.

³² “Report,” 10. The committee did not note that, even without exemptions, one could argue this might also be true in congregations and presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1982.

³³ “Report,” 10–12.

It was on this basis that the committee made its statement of affirmation and its recommendations. Four of the six affirmations were affirmed by the majority and the minority. It was agreed that individuals had a right to their opinions and judgements, but that liberty of conscience was nonetheless not absolute. It was agreed that elders and ministers were “required to act in such a way that the equality of women with men in Christ and their access to a full and valid ministry” as either elders or ministers needed to be “recognized and upheld and neither denied nor prejudiced.” Finally, it was agreed that anyone wishing to change church doctrine or practice needed to work through the courts of the church. There was disagreement, however, on the statement that dissent was the option for ministers and elders who wished to “liberate their conscience before God and all people” and that while there might be “freedom of belief” ministers and elders did not have freedom of action—they must attend all ordinations, regardless of the gender of the candidate. There was also some disagreement with the affirmation that while presbyteries did not have the “authority to grant permission to disobey church law and doctrine on the question of the ordination of women,” they were yet called to respond pastorally to those who were dealing “with cases of conscience on this question.” One suspects it was the first, not second, part of the statement to which those in the minority objected.³⁴

The minority report outlined the positions of those six members of the committee who could not agree on the issues related to exemptions.³⁵ Despite having (seemingly) signed on to the discussions outlined in the report, the minority challenged key points. They argued that church courts could be fallible. They reminded the church that there were different verses in scripture, and different ways of interpreting these (some of which might exclude women from “official teaching/ruling functions”), before opining, “This duality of the biblical data explains why divergent positions are held on this subject, and underlines the need to allow liberty of conscience in regard to mandatory participation in the ordination of women.” However, one is not clear such logic would be allowed in other areas of ecclesiastical life. Nevertheless, the minority went on to argue that the 1966 decision was interpreted by many as “permissive, rather than prescriptive or proscriptive in character,” thus requiring clarity (and presumably greater lee-way to those who understood the decision this way). In evidence of this, the minority made the rather unusual argument that this was so because the Assembly in 1966 “did not decree the disciplinary expulsion of ministers or elders holding conscientious reservations on the matter” nor did the denomination “preclude the ordination or reception of ministers sharing such reservations.”³⁶ It was not noted the church does not habitually remove from office anyone who might disagree with a decision regarding doctrine or polity. Those who disagreed with the church’s revision of the Westminster Confession statements regarding the papacy, for example, were not immediately ejected from the church. The minority also wondered if this current action was not creating a divisive course, and then objected that the decision might preclude called men from serving in the denomination:

If it would be wrong to deny a woman called and endowed of the Lord an opportunity to serve, what makes it right to deny that same privilege solely on the grounds of their conscientious reservations on the subject under consideration? To disqualify them on this criterion alone not only deprives the

³⁴ “Report,” 12,

³⁵ “Minority Report,” 15–16. The “Minority Report” was appended to the “Report,” but stands outside it. Church polity in the Presbyterian Church in Canada actually does not allow minority reports, so this is an interesting (and very wise) departure from that precedent.

³⁶ “Minority Report,” 15.

Church of their consecrated skills but does despite [sic] to the Spirit who enlists and empowers for Christian ministry.³⁷

The minority made one final procedural objection before making its proposal. The minority argued that liberty of conscience on this issue should be allowed and thus individuals could absent themselves from ordination services, as long as they stated their views when they entered a presbytery. As well, those who took this position would be required to promise to use “no unlawful means” to exclude women from various offices in the church and that in these situations the presbytery should be allowed to appoint a moderator *pro tem* (a temporary moderator) “to preside at such nominations, elections, ordinations, or inductions.”; finally, those who took this position would be required, the minority report argued, “to cooperate with all ministers and elders in the work of the Church.” These suggestions, it was argued, did not “retreat from the decision of 1966, nor challenge the authority of the Church,” and would in the end “reverse the trend to polarization” in the church.³⁸ How this might have worked in practice, especially the suggestion regarding a moderator *pro tem*, was not explored. One assumes this would happen in a situation where an election to the eldership took place within a congregation where the minister disagreed with the ordination of women, and might also occur if that particular minister were moderator of presbytery, but these details were not spelled out. Nor was it clear how a female elder (if elected) would then serve on a session with a minister who did not accept women elders. Finally, there is one small detail in the “Minority Report” that merits comment, as the cultural values influencing the attitudes expressed seems on display. Throughout the committee’s report the convenor is referred to as Mrs. Margaret Taylor. In the opening of the “Minority Report,” while thanking her for her leadership, the minority refers to the convenor as Mrs. K. Denton Taylor.³⁹ This convention—with a woman taking not only her husband’s surname, but also being referred to by his given names—is cultural, not biblical. It was (and is) a telling choice.

Not surprisingly, the Task Force report was a key issue at the 1982 General Assembly. The divisions within the denomination that year are well remembered; at the same time, the content of the Task Force report itself and the agreement on so many issues is less well remembered (and hence, why this has been discussed above at some length). The Task Force was given one of the briefing groups (informal opportunities for the various committees of the denomination to present their main recommendations, answer questions from those at General Assembly, and receive feedback) prior to the report being debated during the sittings of the Assembly. The existence of a minority report appended to the main report was unusual; in the end, the Assembly received only the majority report and defeated a later amendment to replace the majority report with the minority report. The matter was debated extensively over two days and approximately three hours, with a full range of opinions being expressed. In the end the recommendations of the report were passed, with seventeen commissioners to the General Assembly registering their dissent. The Declaratory Act which clarified church law was passed and stated that while all “already ordained and inducted” ministers and elders in the denomination had “freedom of belief on the question of the

³⁷ “Minority Report,” 15.

³⁸ “Minority Report,” 16.

³⁹ “Minority Report,” 15. The contrast is with “Report,” 2.

ordination of women” they did not have “freedom of action” and thus must participate in the ordination of women.⁴⁰

As clear as the decision was, the decision in 1982 did not end the debate. There were overtures which appeared after this. Overture 7 to the 1983 General Assembly from Knox Church, Toronto, challenged whether the denomination had ruled correctly, citing the Westminster Confession of Faith’s understanding of liberty of conscience as one of its arguments, a point echoed by Overture 8 that same year from the Session of Cote des Neiges Church, Montreal.⁴¹ As Don MacLeod has suggested, it was this debate which led to the formation of the Renewal Fellowship of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and even as that organization moved, in MacLeod’s words “from reaction to renewal,” an organization now existed outside of the courts and the committees of the church which represented one theological voice (evangelicals).⁴² This was new within the post-union Canadian Presbyterian church.

There is one final point one might make: despite the rhetoric and controversy, it was not clear that the issues of discrimination, first noted in the Montreal Memorial, were ever dealt with. It did become church policy that all interim-moderators were not allowed to discriminate against female candidates; however, it is not clear how many cases emerged where interim moderators were challenged or disciplined on this issue. Presbyteries did not intrude into congregations and demand that there be female elders elected. Congregations continued to have all male sessions. Some presbyteries remained exclusively male in their composition when it came to ministers. While clear decisions were made, the denomination did not go after those who objected (or even continued to defy the decision), and certainly not in the manner the minority report suggested might have (should have?) occurred after the 1966 decision.

Placing the Debate in Context

Given this outline of the debate on the place of women in the church that took place in the years between 1979 and 1982, it is important to note two major things. The first deals with the phrase “liberty of conscience,” while the second references the context in which this debate took place. First, it is worth noting how it is easy in the Presbyterian Church in Canada to confuse two things: Chapter XX of the Westminster Confession of Faith which speaks of liberty of conscience generally; and the ordination vows which specifically grant liberty of conscience on one issue (as well as liberty of opinion on another). The ordination vows directly address the Westminster Confession of Faith, and gave those seeking ordination specific liberty of conscience on this one element of this confession, specifically the sections related to Chapter XXIII (the relationship between church and state). The Westminster Confession imagines a godly state and a particular vision of how godly magistrates should support the church. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this was a source of great division among Presbyterians. In the 1875 union which created the Presbyterian Church in Canada (as well as in the unions between various presbyterian bodies

⁴⁰ James Dickey, *Presbyterian Record*, July–August 1982, 13. Reports on this are in the editorial, 6 and then scattered throughout the report on the General Assembly, 10–14. The Report and Debate are also in the *Acts and Proceedings*, 1982.

⁴¹ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1983, 500–501. Overture 13, Session of Bridlewood, makes similar arguments, 502. See also Overture 20, Presbytery of Miramichi, 504–505, Overture 21, Session of St. Paul’s, Ottawa, 505–506, and other overtures and memorials in 1983 and the years following.

⁴² The formation of the Renewal Fellowship is explored in MacLeod, “From Reaction to Renewal,” 187, and elsewhere.

in British North America which led up to the 1875 union) the decision was made to allow “liberty of conscience” on this one particular area, in order that the new denomination might be formed. This is the most common way in which Canadian Presbyterians have used this phrase “liberty of conscience.” Canadian Presbyterians have generally never accepted the kind of broad definition in Chapter XX nor made consistent reference to this chapter. Confusion as to the two meanings or understandings of the term may be part of what was occurring in the early 1980s.

It may also be because of this that a confusion, leading to a distortion, has begun to creep into the historical record. Put simply, it is now suggested that liberty of conscience *was given* in 1966 on the issue of the ordination of women, then *rescinded* during the debate in the 1980s.

At the 2021 General Assembly, Overture 1 from Western Han-Ca incorrectly stated:

Whereas, the liberty of conscience and action in the remits cannot be guaranteed in perpetuity, according to the Book of Forms, and as evidenced in the history of that provision for the ordination of women which was granted in 1966 and revoked in 1982.

The same claim, in almost identical language, was made in Overture 20, from the Presbytery of Eastern Han-Ca.⁴³ It needs to be clearly stated—and as the evidence presented in this paper shows—this did not happen. Liberty of conscience on this issue was not requested in 1966, nor was it granted. Nothing in the reports, majority or minority, of the Task Force on Liberty of Conscience, reference the granting of liberty of conscience on this issue in 1966. The facts are clear: liberty of conscience was not granted on the ordination of women in 1966.

Second, it needs to be noted that this debate occurred in a particular historical context and at a particularly moment in time. Most discussions on the decision of the Presbyterian Church in Canada to ordain women as ministers and elders focus exclusively on the details not only within the denomination but within this debate itself. Now that we have a clear sense of what happened and when various developments occurred, it is important to place these developments in a broader context. If one considers developments within the denomination, an important development to note was the flood of overtures which were sent to the 1979 General Assembly, just on the eve of the re-emergence of this issue. The ten overtures (noted in the introduction to this paper) all dealt with complaints from various quarters of the church related to the Program to Combat Racism of the World Council of Churches, specifically the contention that grants had been given to armed guerrilla groups in Africa who had used violence in Rhodesia and Southern Africa. Overture 24 from the Presbytery of Niagara noted the “considerable discontent” among congregations that church funds were given to this World Council of Churches Program and asks that the General Assembly “critically review the present attitude” towards this program in order to better understand the denomination’s “relationship to the whole question of political involvement and violent upheaval.”⁴⁴ Among the other nine overtures, there were several calls for the Presbyterian Church in Canada to suspend its membership in the World Council of Churches and cease all financial support immediately. Overture 13 from the Presbytery of Kootenay made this demand, citing the violence caused by the guerrilla groups and the deaths of Christian missionaries “killed by these revolutionaries” and its belief that the World Council of Churches was “furthering more

⁴³ *Acts and Proceedings*, 2021, Overture 1, Presbytery of Western Han Ca, 740. Overture 20, Presbytery of Eastern Han Can, 750. Overture 22, Eastern Han Ca, 752, makes a slightly different suggestion in terms of the Declaratory Acts of 1982 and 1989.

⁴⁴ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1979, Overture 24, 452.

the cause of terrorism than it is championing the plight of suffering people.”⁴⁵ There was also an extensive amount of detail about the amount of funds given, as well as the actions of other churches—notably the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Salvation Army (Overture 29)—had already taken in suspending their membership.⁴⁶ This was clearly an issue that had mobilized Presbyterians in all regions of the country. Some of the common details in these overtures suggest communication between these congregations and presbyteries and/or that they were reading the same information. Jim Dickey, in the July/August issue of the *Record*, reported on the overtures and the considerable debate that ensued at the General Assembly. Dickey included the text of the report that was given in response to these overtures. While the ultimate resolution kept the Presbyterian Church in Canada in the World Council of Churches, the debate was in and of itself fascinating.⁴⁷ Equally fascinating is the fact that this has seemingly disappeared from the collective memory of the denomination: no one with whom I have spoken seems to recall this as a contentious event from this period.

If 1979 saw considerable debate within the Presbyterian Church in Canada on the issue of the Program to Combat Racism of the World Council of Churches, it is worth noting that it was a pivotal year within the broader political context, not only in Canada but throughout Western nations. This was the historical moment when the cultural changes which began in the “1960s” were being contested, sometimes very strongly.⁴⁸ New political figures were emerging who strongly contested the direction in which their nation seemed to be heading, and the values and attitudes that had emerged as a result of the 1960s. In Canada, Brian Mulroney represented a mild version of this; Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States provide clearer evidence of this reaction. Thatcher was elected Prime Minister in 1979; Reagan was emerging in this year as one of the strongest contenders for the Republican nomination for President in the United States. Even more tellingly, it was in 1979 that the United States failed to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the American Constitution. The Equal Rights Amendment would have made men and women equal in terms of law, and this seemed an innocuous idea and an important step forward when this was first proposed in 1972. Many States quickly ratified this amendment; however, as the decade progressed opposition and backlash increased. Some States that had already ratified the Equal Rights Amendment rescinded their previous decisions. By 1979 it was clear this would not pass. The Equal Rights Amendment failed to receive the necessary approvals to be added to the constitution and thus died.⁴⁹ This is important context for the debates within the Presbyterian Church in Canada. These debates were in society, in newspapers and on television. Women were pushing for equality; others (female and male) were pushing back against these expectations. There was thus a conflict within culture: we should not be surprised to see debates of the broader culture—support for the Program to Combat Racism of the World Council of Churches, issues of the place of women, the issue of abortion—reflected in

⁴⁵ *Acts and Proceedings*, 1979, Overture 13, 455.

⁴⁶ The figure of \$85,000 was cited by the presbytery of Miramichi (Overture 21), as well as in other Overtures. *Acts and Proceedings*, 1979, 458–463.

⁴⁷ Dickey, *Presbyterian Record*, July/August 1979, 8–10.

⁴⁸ The changes in the 1960s have been explored in several books, of key interest are Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c.1958–c.1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), and Alan Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For the reaction, see Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the 1960s and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴⁹ On the Equal Rights Amendment, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equal_Rights_Amendment.

the debates within the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Indeed, these broader cultural clashes are evident in Jim Dickey's reporting on the 1979 General Assembly, specifically as it relates to the issues of the place of women in society and the church. One minister who "had reservations of conscience about the ordination of women" spoke of feeling "singled out for pressure" and being "forced to affirm" more than he felt he could. The issue of inclusive language was also briefly noted.⁵⁰ These issues simmered beneath the surface throughout this period. In 1982, the Board of Ministry, noted in its report that priority should be given by the Colleges "to the appointment of women (to the faculty) where candidates of equal qualifications are being considered." One critic was quoted as wondering if there was more than the Gospel behind this: "Is it Christ or women's lib'?"⁵¹ Canadian Presbyterians were clearly aware of and influenced by the broader cultural debates on the place of women within society as a whole, not simply their place in the church.⁵²

Conclusion

Why 1979? Why in this year did the Presbyterian Church in Canada, which had seemingly decided to accept the ordination of women thirteen years earlier, find itself embroiled in a major controversy? This paper has explored these questions from a variety of angles and gone over the events of the period from 1979 through 1982 in order to lay out what occurred in these years within the denomination. What seems clear is that the issue of discrimination being faced by women wishing to be ministers emerged in 1979. This would have been before the General Assembly in 1980, regardless of any other events. It is also clear that those opposed to the decision of the denomination in 1966 to ordain women as ministers and elders continued to act as if that decision had never been made. This was easy to do. If, as I suggested in the paper presented to this society in 2016, the main impact of the decision in the years immediately following 1966 was on the local congregation with women being allowed to serve on sessions as elders, it was easy for sessions and ministers who did not accept the ordination of women to simply not allow for the election of women elders. There had been no reason to request exemption or liberty of conscience in 1966 because this was self-evident. Those objecting would simply continue as if the decision had not been made. It might be challenging to have women elders at General Assembly or at presbytery meetings, but one might simply ignore them and continue to address the court in the time-honoured way, "Fathers and brethren," thus ignoring those women present.⁵³ Active discrimination was tolerated—the obvious example being the Mission Board having one list of possible Ordained Missionary placements for male and female candidates, and one (larger) list for only male candidates. It was only as the number of female candidates for ministry grew, as it did in the later 1970s, that these practices came under greater and greater stress. With more women studying to be ministers and then entering the ministry, a crisis was seemingly inevitable. Those opposed could no longer pretend that the decision, at least as it applied to women as ministers, had never been

⁵⁰ Jim Dickey, *Presbyterian Record*, July–August 1979, 12–13. Dickey refers to the work of the Committee struck to deal with the Montreal Memorial as "sensitive" and a "delicate task."

⁵¹ Jim Dickey, *Presbyterian Record*, July–August 1982, 20. The quotation is attributed to Peter Szabo of the presbytery of Montreal.

⁵² Dickson, "Testing 1966," notes the cultural influences of Rene Levesque's Quebec and other issues, 43. MacLeod, "From Reaction to Renewal," notes the growth among evangelicals in the 1980s, 176, and other contextual factors.

⁵³ This seemingly continued even after 1982. At one of the first presbytery meetings I attended (I was a student on summer placement in 1984), a retired minister addressed the court in this manner.

made. There would be ordinations they might need to attend. There would be inductions of those who, because they were women, they considered ineligible to serve as ministers into congregations. Ignoring the decision and pretending it had never been made was becoming more and more difficult, if not impossible. This is one reason why in 1979 a crisis developed; liberty of conscience, however, seems to be an inappropriate term to describe what occurred.

Alongside the internal dynamics of the Presbyterian Church in Canada there were also the cultural forces. We need to be clear: these were never mutually exclusive. Culture and church were always interacting. What this paper is suggesting, however, is that culture loomed larger in these years than has been previously appreciated. That the Presbyterian Church in Canada again began debating the place of women in the church the year that the Equal Rights Amendment failed to pass in the United States of America should, given the cultural dominance of America on Canadian culture by this time, be seriously considered. The flurry of overtures challenging the World Council of Churches Program to Combat Racism within the broader culture in this period also needs to be noted. This too was a broader cultural debate. Working to overcome racism had been (largely) an issue that aroused the sympathy of Canadian Presbyterians. Yet by the late 1970s challenges, often framed around violence or the excessive demands of racial minorities, were beginning to be heard. Many of what emerged as positive values or changes in the 1960s, were by 1979 being contested. The origins of what we now refer to as “the culture wars” can be traced to these years. Canadian Presbyterians have never been of one mind. The denomination has always had divergent voices and different attitudes on a variety of issues; yet, it seems that something different may have been emerging in this period. One tentative argument—one that requires more investigation—is that it was at this point that the broader culture wars came to play a role in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and that this made debates after 1979 different from what had been the case previously. Whether or not this is true, one thing should be clear: debates within the broader North American context about the place of women in society, coincided with the debate on women’s ordination which re-emerged in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. One would be naive to think this was a mere coincidence.