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THE WESLEYAN TRADITION AND THE POOR IN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

The Wesleyan/Methodist tradition in Canada has been broad and varied, including the major brands of Methodism that came to Canada from Britain and the United States near the end of the eighteenth century. They included the main body of Wesleyan Methodists, Methodist Episcopal, New Connexion and Primitive Methodists. Most of these entered the union of Methodist churches in 1884. Again, virtually the whole of the Canadian Methodist Church entered union with Presbyterians and Congregationalists to form the United Church of Canada in 1925. The United Church has in various degrees seen itself as the bearer of the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition in Canada since 1925. This very brief discussion of the relation of the tradition to the poor in Canada will have to scan a period of about two centuries, looking at the periods before and after church union.

Our historians inform us that Canadian Methodism for the first century or so was overwhelmingly revivalist in nature, characterized from the first by itinerant preachers, usually travelling by horseback in John Wesley's own style preaching a message of repentance and salvation. These preaching evangelists were immensely successful in the numbers of conversions secured, and the numbers of Methodist believers and circuits which mounted up in a brief period. In 1791, the year of Wesley's death, Methodism in the whole of Upper and Lower Canada, the Maritimes and Newfoundland, could boast

Methodism, together with other churches, contributed much to the humanization and civilization of Canada during its growing years, and those who might have been categorized as 'the poor' were often beneficiaries of this. It cannot be said, however, that ministry to the poor as such was one of its major characteristics. Methodists believed that solutions to social problems, including poverty, would arise only out of the conversion of individuals. The church's task was not to reform society, but to save souls. This being done, social problems would look after themselves.

This attitude began to shift by the 1880's. One factor in bringing about this shift, surprisingly enough, was the arrival of Salvationists in Canada in the early '80's. The Salvation Army immediately constituted a challenge to the increasingly settled and respectable Methodist churches, even attracting not a few Methodist church members. General William Booth's book of 1890, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, presented a new approach to the poor of the cities. Booth's position had been to secure the salvation of souls first, and to leave the bodily needs to be supplied afterward. But now he argued that, unless pressing bodily wants were supplied, the people would perish.<sup>3</sup> This book was apparently something of a sensation both in Britain and in Canada, and did much to stimulate amongst Canadian Methodists a new concern for the most destitute and degraded of the urban poor. Before the turn of the century the Methodist churches became heavily engaged in practical assistance to

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<sup>3</sup> Airhart, op. cit., p. 74.

salvation precedes individual salvation both temporally and in importance."<sup>5</sup> This definition, as historian Phyllis Airhart suggests, may be too narrow, and includes only a few of the most radical 'social gospellers'. Perhaps we may more usefully think of 'social gospel' as that early twentieth century movement which emphasized the political and social task of Christianity to improve the quality of human relations on this earth, which called men and women to engage in realizing the Kingdom of God in the fabric of society. "The demand to 'save this man now' became 'save this society now'."<sup>6</sup> Some of the major theologians behind, or participant in this movement were Albrecht Ritschl, R. J. Campbell in Britain, Walter Rauschenbusch in the USA, and Salem Bland in Canada. Bland was a Methodist preacher and academic, who was ejected from his teaching post in a theological college after involvement in a radical strike action in Winnipeg in 1919. The social gospel movement tended to be relatively liberal and modernist, stripping away husks of older Christian orthodoxy, seeking the essence of the gospel in the call to God's Kingdom of social justice.<sup>7</sup> Methodists in Canada were by no means alone, but were arguably pre-eminent in the social gospel movement. The heritage of Wesleyan concern for

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<sup>5</sup> This is the definition of William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (second edition) New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) quoted by Airhart, op. cit., p. 104.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971) p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-7.

in Canada and elsewhere. But the boom in church membership and building that followed the war gave significant social influence to the churches, especially the largest Protestant denomination, the United Church, which tended to see itself as 'the conscience of the nation'. The United Church through its General Council officially supported new developments toward the welfare state, labour legislation such as minimum wage laws, freedom to organize unions, affordable housing for working women, as well as compassionate programs of foreign aid to developing nations. The United Church also opposed racial discrimination in hiring practices, and, more in line with its older tradition, fought the abuse of alcohol and gambling.<sup>9</sup>

By the 1970's, and more so in the 1980's, in a time of secularization and pluralization, with declining membership and influence, the United Church, at least through its leadership and public statements, began to see itself as a minority, and shifted from the model of 'conscience of the nation' to that of 'solidarity with the marginalized'. The mission statements and official documents of the General Council, national divisions and committees clearly reflect the 'option for the poor' of liberation theology and of feminist theology. The United Church of Canada, more than any other Canadian denomination, has a public image amongst Canadians as a liberal, even radical church, siding publicly

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bonnie Greene, "A Church Born on the Edge of the Bush," in *Voices and Visions: 65 Years of the United Church of Canada*, ed. Peter Gordon White (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1990) pp. 77-94.