

MISSION ON THE B.C. COAST

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Missionary is almost a dirty word for a lot of people in our times. Missionaries are regarded by some as colonialists or cultural imperialists who interfered with the perfectly good lives of non-white peoples around the world. They are thought to be agents of domination rather than liberation, and are seen to have done more harm than good. They are accused of having an incurable case of white man's burden which was to establish the superiority of white western civilization over the follies of heathen peoples all around the world.

There is, of course some truth in this reading of missionary history, but it is far from the whole truth. As time goes on the positive values of the missionary work of the church around the world is becoming increasingly clear to historians and to the peoples who were the object of the missionary enterprise.

One of the most beneficial and most honourable of missionary enterprises has taken place in British Columbia. It is a story that we in the United Church can be truly proud of. It is a record of good work that is acknowledged by the present leaders of the native peoples. It is a story that is still going on with new chapters being written even today.

In order to understand the history of church work on the B.C. coast it is necessary to recall the conditions of the native peoples at the time when the church began its missionary work here in B.C.

The white colonists brought with them to B.C. not first of all the church but first of all alcohol and a variety of diseases that killed off large numbers of native people. Alcohol to the natives was like the drug epidemic that is now raging across North America. No sacrifice was too great, no price too high to pay for more whiskey. Women and children were sold into slavery to pay for it. Prostitution mushroomed to pay for alcohol. And the sexually transmitted diseases killed and crippled incredible numbers of native people. The Haidas, for example, were reduced from 8000 strong to less than 800 in a few short years. The same was true for all the tribes along the coast. Many thought the native peoples would soon die out altogether.

At the same time, the natives were often at war with each other as tribes tried to improve their circumstances by taking whatever wealth or slaves they could capture from other tribes. Like all wars the native wars were extremely bloody and took a terrible toll on women and children as well as the warriors.

Health conditions in general were appalling. In addition to unchecked diseases, ordinary wounds and sores lingered and often led to premature death. Life expectancy was under 35 years. There was a lot of blindness and infirmities of all kinds.

There were also some people who cared about what was happening to the native people.

The Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches and the Salvation Army were the main Christian denominations here at the time. They were all eventually involved in mission work in B.C, but it was the Methodist and Presbyterian churches that got the work started first and got it going in the most remote areas of the B.C coastline.

There were a number of outstanding missionaries – both white and then native—who pioneered the work of the church all up and down the B.C. coast. None were greater than Thomas and Emma Crosby.

Thomas and Emma Crosby were sent to Port Simpson up near the Alaska panhandle. For the first 10 years Crosby travelled up and down the coast by dugout canoe. Then he got a steamer, called the Glad Tidings, which turned out to be the first in a long line of mission boats.

Crosby wrote a book about his experiences. It gives a clear picture of the conditions of the native people at the time and the ways the missionaries helped improve life for them.

Crosby and all the other church workers on the B.C. coast were committed to improving the quality of life in any way they could think of. They were not just trying to rack up a big number of converts. Education was a major aspect of their contribution. Native leaders saw the advantages in their people learning to read and write and they literally begged the church to send teachers to their scattered communities. In some cases entire tribes moved to a location where a teacher was available.

Crosby had a big concern for improving housing, and his steam boat was used to haul lumber for constructing at least 14 different villages as well schools and mission houses and churches.

Methodists have typically had a concern for what John Wesley called practical Christianity. Crosby was no exception. He initiated fire brigades, brass bands, rifle companies, and industrial fairs. He was known as a peacemaker, and helped warring tribes come to peace settlements in the name of the Prince of Peace.

Emma Crosby started a home for abused and abandoned girls. Several such homes were eventually started because the need was so great. Here is a short passage from Crosby's book.

“The most trying part of our work was to see the people sell their daughters to white men for the basest of purposes. We went after them to the magistrate to ask him if it was allowable to have slaves bought and sold in this country. Twelve or fifteen of these poor girls were thus sold in a short time from one of our schools. One man bought a child who soon died in his hands, after which he bought another one.... It was evident that something must be done to save and protect the young girls of the coast. They would come, one after another, and ask the missionary's wife for her protection; and thus one and another and another were taken into the house until it was crowded and we had to enlarge it.”

Emma Crosby's home for girls was taken on as the first project to be supported by the newly formed W.M.S. of the Methodist Church of Canada – which was the forerunner of the WMS and the UCW of the United Church of Canada.

Crosby and other early missionaries soon realised how necessary it was to get trained medical workers up and down the coast if the quality of life for the natives was to be really improved. Crosby, himself, built three hospitals and arranged for the first doctors and nurses in the area to be sent out by the Methodist Church. Thomas and Emma Crosby experienced in their own family the hardship of living in a remote area without medical doctors. They lost four children to the diseases that could not be treated adequately without professional help. Emma Crosby herself very nearly died from the sickness that took two of her daughters in the course of a very few days. The missionaries were not spared from the grief that so many of the native peoples suffered continuously. The natives and missionaries were bound together by common

suffering and hardship and as time went on, by the ties of a common faith and the knowledge of the love of God.

Native Christians gradually entered every aspect of the church's work. One of them whose name was Wil-um-Clah went from Port Simpson to Fort Wrangle in Alaska where he started a school and a church and a home for abused girls. He worked there until disease took his life. He was in fact the first person to represent the Christian church in Alaska. There were dozens of native Christians like Wil-um-Clah who entered into the work that the churches were trying to carry out with very limited resources and personnel across the vast area of the B.C. coast.

The same kind of work that began over a hundred years ago has gone on ever since and is still going on today. The living conditions of the native peoples have improved somewhat over the years but the work of education, health care, ministry and doing practical Christianity has continued to the present day.

The cooperation with native Christian workers has increased, if anything, over the years. Now there is an organization of native leaders called the Coastal Regional Group which advises the Division of Prince Rupert Presbytery in its oversight of all the work of the United Church on the B.C. coast. There is also a theological education program to train native pastors for the native villages rather than having white clergy be the ministers. The program is called TEE (Theological Education by Extension), and it is operated ecumenically with the Anglican Church. The U.C.C. still operates three hospitals and binary clinics.

Eventually, the decision was made to discontinue the operation of the Thomas Crosby V, the last in a long succession of mission boats on the west coast. This decision did not represent a withdrawal of the United Church from its work on the coast. The "Crosby" was put up for sale because the native leaders, in consultation with Prince Rupert Presbytery, came to the conclusion that a single big boat is no longer the right kind of hardware to service the present needs of the people living along the coast. The needs of ministry have changed.

What is needed now are local native pastors to live and work in the communities formerly served by occasional visits of the Crosby. These native pastors are being recruited in the villages along the coast and are being trained, whether for lay or ordered ministry, in the TEE program while they continue to live and work as lay ministers in their home villages.

A few “district ministers,” like the Rev. Paul Davis who pioneered in this work, serve as tutors in the TEE programs and continue to visit people in isolated places that are not big enough to have a resident native pastor. These district ministers are not called missionaries. That designation is no longer appropriate. The Division of World Outreach no longer speaks of missionaries, it speaks instead of overseas personnel. It would be misleading to suggest that God’s work is primarily in the hands of a few “missionaries.”

The United Church has started an endowment fund to provide a more solid financial base to carry on the work on the coast and expand it if possible to do more of the work that is there to do. The costs today can be covered mainly with money and with the dedicated efforts of doctors, nurses, ministers and teachers who do the work. Few of them will have to pay the price that Thomas and Emma Crosby had to pay. When they left Fort Simpson they left four of their children behind.

The General Superintendent of the Methodist Church at that time was a Dr. Carman of Toronto. In 1896 he reported on a visit to the North Pacific coast. Here is a quote from his report.

“I confess that some of my notions have been changed---I think corrected. I used to think the Indians necessarily a fading, failing race; that they must die and pass away, that there could be no self-propagating church, no self-sustaining Christianity among them. Brothers and Sisters, do we not dishonour the Gospel of God? Is it not to save the bodies and souls of the races, the peoples? Drunkenness and dissoluteness will destroy the races, the peoples, the nations. But I believe that Jesus Christ can save them body and soul, tribe and nation, family and people. I have seen it in Fort Simpson and other places. Nothing will do it but the grace of God. But thanks be to God. That can do it and does it.”

We can still basically agree with Dr. Carman. In hindsight we can see how missionaries sometimes confused the Christian gospel with western culture. The United Church issued an apology to the native peoples of Canada.

We can also see now that some of the traditional values of the native culture may help save us from the vices and destructiveness of our industrial civilization that is ravaging the forests and polluting the waters on which we depend for life itself. But we have not changed our mind about the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to bring peace and well-being to human beings. The missionaries of yesterday were not mistaken about that. Thanks be to God.