

What Happened to Methodism in Canada during the First World War

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Near the beginning of the First World War, the Rev. S.D. Chown, Superintendent of the Methodist Church, declared that “khaki has become a sacred colour” and, by war’s end, he had concluded in a repentant fashion that the Methodist Church could never again be caught “painting roses on the lid of hell.”¹ Suggesting a much broader and deeper process of disillusionment, Chown also suggested that in “many minds the war shook with the violence of a moral and intellectual earthquake the foundations of Christian faith. It shattered many structures of belief which devout people found refuge from the storms of life . . . In deep perplexity, many silently drifted into a sheer atheism which denied the very existence of the Almighty.”² In my recent chapter on the Methodist Church and World War I in Gordon Heath’s edited volume *Canadian Churches and the First World War*, I suggested that Chown’s typically dramatic rhetoric, although certainly capturing some realities of the Methodist experience, may have been too sweeping in its declaration of disillusionment.³ This narrative of militant idealism followed by ever deepening disillusionment – although certainly valid – masks a great deal of the complexity of the Methodist experience during World War I.⁴ It may have overlooked a far more complex and nuanced picture of the war’s impact. Within Methodism, there was a range of experiences and perspectives and, in many cases, religious beliefs and practices that changed or were fluid depending on the particular circumstances being faced in the chaos of the war. Some Methodists questioned the existence of a loving and merciful God as a

result of the terrible carnage of the war, and some wondered about the presence of Jesus Christ, the savior, as so many endured painful suffering through the terror of the fighting or the grief of facing the death of a loved one.⁵ On the one hand, S. D. Chown's agonizing postwar musings were critical of the Methodist Church's identification with the cause of the war. On the other, the Christian notion of salvation through sacrifice as a way to understand the terrible toll of the war offered a powerful note of consolation. For many, the powerful image of the crucified Christ, as a symbol of sacrifice and life-everlasting, was one way to endure the unthinkable suffering and cope with the loss of loved ones at the front.⁶

My argument is that there was neither a sweeping religious revival within Canadian Methodism during the war nor a mass exodus from the church at war's end. As one Methodist chaplain pointed out to the Methodist Church's Army and Navy Board, he did not "find any great outpouring of deep religious desire such as it was said the war was producing," but he did not witness any outright rejection of belief in Christianity.⁷ The impact of the war on the Methodist Church of Canada was neither revival nor a shattering loss of faith, but a drift away from the church. This drift was not accompanied by a wholesale condemnation of the church and its chaplains. It was rooted in moral questions as opposed to matters of faith. The Methodist Church was gravely concerned about the moral impact of the war upon the soldiers. In joining the Canadian Expeditionary Force, Methodist recruits were torn away from the uplifting surroundings of home, family, and church. Military life and the brutalities of warfare seemed to undermine the morality of the young men. For many Methodists, a decline in moral standards was a sign of a deeper loss of faith. This equation of morality with piety was still very strong. For the battle-hardened soldier, moral transgressions such as swearing, drinking and gambling, or even sexual promiscuity did not indicate that they had abandoned their faith in Christianity or rejected God. Soldiers' disillusionment was often a result of their resentment toward the Methodist Church's insistence that they submit to a strict moral code. The soldiers' rejection of the Methodist Church's insistence on upholding a traditional moral code was a more common problem than any wholesale loss of faith.⁸ In this essay, an afterthought to my comments before a joint session of the Canadian Historical Association and the Canadian Society of Church History in May 2014, I explore this theme of drift away from the Church more closely and with particular emphasis on the end of the war.

The Methodist Church was determined to do everything possible to

protect the moral standards of the young men that it so enthusiastically encouraged to volunteer. In reporting moral conditions in the camps, chaplains were intent on making it clear that they were not simply shocked at being thrust into a rugged male culture after years in the pristine surroundings of the local parish. For instance, in reporting the “deplorable moral conditions” overseas, H. E. Thomas of the New Brunswick Conference felt the need to explain that his dismay about his “daily contact with immortality” was not the result of some naïve or innocent notions of the human condition. “I feel that I have seen enough of life not to expect military affairs to be conducted as is a Methodist Sunday School, and I have known enough about the prevalence of social vice, everywhere, not to be startled at the ordinary signs of its presence; but I have to confess that moral conditions on the whole, and especially as they obtain in England, have given greater depression of spirits to me and concerned me more than anything that has taken place in France or Belgium. This war will save England from many things, but to imagine that by it the Empire will be saved with an intelligent Christian salvation, with a salvation that gives purity of heart and life, is utter folly.”⁹ The incidence of alcohol and sexual promiscuity leading to cases of venereal disease, Thomas confessed, were “making an Evangelist of me where I never was one before.” He revealed that “every night I read my Bible and I pray” even though there is always “plenty of cursing around.”¹⁰ Although there was little dispute about the existence of the problems relating to drink and venereal disease, there was debate among the chaplains about how serious these moral conditions were.¹¹

A. D. Robb was particularly concerned about the furor in Methodist circles in Canada concerning the discovery of playing cards in parcels sent overseas. For Robb, this outburst of moral panic was misplaced. He, of course, witnessed the card-playing and the more scandalous gambling at poker. “I am the last man to deprive the lonely lads of Canada of their cards,” he wrote to the Methodist Church. “Civilian life and soldier life are in two separate categories. The ethics of the Army are perhaps too broad. I fear the ethics of the Civilian is sometimes too narrow.” This incident was of concern to Robb because he thought that it reflected an underlying source of serious misunderstanding between the home front and the soldier. If the church insisted on judging the men overseas by such moral transgressions as card playing, Robb feared, then that puritanical and condemnatory stance would only invite ridicule of the Church among the officers and the men. “I do greatly fear that this sort of thing will find

many men alienated from our beloved Methodism. The church must be big enough to contain these soldiers else we will lose them from our fold.” Worried about how his more liberal position would be interpreted back home, Robb quickly added a note of personal explanation. “Don’t put me down for a heretic or a degenerate or a backslider or a disloyal member – I am not – I think of one of Christ’s dictums ‘He that is without sin let him cast the first stone.’”¹²

With these concerns in mind, the Methodist Church’s Army and Navy Board charged S. D. Chown with investigating moral conditions overseas. He visited numerous camps and hospitals in England and was also taken by military officials to Vimy Ridge, the Somme, and Ypres during his eight-week tour in the summer of 1917. In his report to the Methodist Church, Chown had to balance his criticisms of the problems at the front with reassurances that the morality of the men was not being seriously compromised. Echoing many of the chaplains, he suggested that there were understandable reasons for some of the troubling behavior that concerned Methodists. His interviews with soldiers helped him understand their horrendously difficult situation. He suggested that the soldiers’ sexual behavior was likely the result of the frightening battlefield conditions they faced as opposed to any flaw in their moral character. “One might suppose,” he wrote, that “the Tommy, by reason of his exposure to danger and daily living in apprehension that each day might be his last . . . would, thereby, be hardened, but this is not the case.” Instead, “he is full of a gushing human feeling. He loves everybody, particularly women. He loves them indiscriminately.” While on leave, they were desperately lonely, and homesickness came over them. Chown was hinting at something akin to psychological break-down in his analysis. They could not be considered to be living in their normal state, he argued. “Some are shattered in nerves, some in body and others experience weakness of will in the presence of the abounding temptations to which they are exposed.”¹³ His report was, more than anything else, a defense of the character of the Canadian soldier. Many of the charges about the lax behavior and immoral character were “slandorous” in his view, “and showed absolutely no understanding of the challenges the men faced.”¹⁴ His explanation of whatever moral transgressions took place among the soldiers was, in essence, a plea for greater understanding and compassion for the soldier. Chown clearly appreciated what the soldiers faced and understood that in such conditions one had to reserve judgment and not resort to a facile application of the Methodist Code of Discipline and

condemn the soldier and military life as a result.

For many of the chaplains, the best defense against the problem of moral decline rested in evangelism. During the Christmas season of 1915, H. W. Burnett from the Montreal Conference, who was attached to the 102nd battalion at Bramshott Camp, attempted “to get the men . . . to take a definite stand for Christ.” But he found that sustained evangelistic effort was difficult to carry out. He visited the men in their recreation huts in the evening and, when he managed to get some of them together for an impromptu service, he discovered that it was impossible to hold it for a suitably long duration “as the movements of the troops are very uncertain, perhaps when you have made arrangements you will find that the men had received an unexpected order to go up to the trenches as a working party, to repair trenches destroyed by a sudden bombardment; so that you have to take the men whenever you can get them, that of course makes the work more difficult.” There was growing concern among the chaplains that this sporadic worship would have a negative impact on the habit of attending regular worship when the men returned home. On the other hand, these informal services were far more effective than the formal services of the Church Parade to which the men strenuously objected.¹⁵

Despite the challenges of holding worship and prayer at the front, H. W. Burnett often managed to organize informal gatherings characterized by “the inspiring singing of the old hymns, in which all heartily joined, the fervent prayers of the men, and the remarkable spiritual influence pervading the services, made them seasons of great spiritual uplift, usually I closed each service with the Lord’s Supper, simply and spiritually conducted, in which the larger number of the men present most earnestly participated.”¹⁶ Indeed Burnett’s accounts of his activities at the front sound very much like of those of saddle-bag Methodist itinerant preachers in the backwoods of Canada.

Perhaps it would be of interest to give you an account of my work last Sunday, the 23rd inst. I was situated in a camp about two miles back from the trenches and held my first service in the camp. At my suggestion the service was made voluntary and not a parade and yet the large reception hut where it was held was full. I used as a platform an old box and conducted an Easter Musical Service into which the men entered very heartily. As I spoke on “immortality” every eye was upon me; for the proximity of death to many of them at least made the subject very vital to them. I offered special prayer for the folks at home, and especially the families that had been bereft of loved ones

during our last trip to the trenches.

Then, “gathering up my hymn books, which I put in my haversack on my back, I started across the country for a two mile walk up to my next service. When I arrived I found 700 or 800 men gathered in a large barn, with an improvised platform. Having distributed my hymn books, we commenced what proved to be a very inspiring service.” After “a hurried lunch with the officers,” Burnett was “off again for a few miles across country to a battery where I gathered the men together in a hut, and entered upon a service full of enthusiasm and interest. The singing was very hearty, and the men listened very intently as we again pleaded with them for personal decision for Christ. A hearty shake of hands with the men and we started for another battery.”¹⁷

Throughout these services Burnett’s “constant theme . . . was the great importance of definite decision for Christ.” Over five hundred men decided for Christ during evangelistic efforts extending from December 10th to New Year’s Eve. Burnett’s calculations were based on the number of men who sealed their decision by Communion. Burnett also engaged in a vigorous letter writing campaign informing ministers at home that a particular soldier had made a decision for Christ. This letter writing campaign was designed, in part, to help consolidate the soldier’s commitment to the Church, but it was also designed to assure congregations at home that the faith and morality of the soldier was certainly intact, if not stronger. Nevertheless, such responses to Burnett’s revival-like services suggest that under certain circumstances the war was a catalyst for localized revivals. But these revivals did not necessarily spread beyond a certain place and time and they did not necessarily translate to sustained church life on the part of those who were converted at the Front.¹⁸

Accounts of wartime religiosity suggest that it was just before and after battle, in particular, that the soldiers seemed to become the most observant. During the Battle of the Somme, Major Fallis recalled being approached by a soldier asking if he would administer Holy Communion, “as we may never come out alive.”¹⁹ When administered before battle, communion was regarded as preparation to petition for God to provide guidance and protection during the fighting. After battle, it was regarded as an opportunity for thanksgiving. But the appeal of communion services seemed to fade as the war dragged on. Other chaplains noted that as the war continued fewer men partook in the Lord’s Supper as some became superstitious, worrying that communion was a preparation for death, while

others rejected the idea of approaching the Lord's table for they felt too unworthy.²⁰

As the men continued to witness an ever growing number of their fellow combatants killed or maimed, they began to doubt whether their prayers were being heard. Even though the appeal of formal church services and the draw of communion seemed to trail off as the war dragged on, the idea that the soldier was making a Christ-like sacrifice did not diminish. As A. D. Robb explained from his dugout in June 1918, Christ was with the fallen soldiers. "I have seen these boys die; I have seen them bleed; I have seen them suffer and they have given me a view of Calvary. I believe my Christ looks after these men in the field and the unnamed graves."²¹ And from the pen of a Methodist soldier, Private George Turpin of British Columbia, a similar understanding of life-everlasting gained through their sacrifice during battle was expressed. "By the way of the cross men marched to duty and danger and some found in the trenches the gateway of eternal life open for them, with Christ waiting to welcome them."²²

Attitudes to death and the afterlife were undergoing a transformation both at the front and at home in Canada. In many people's estimation the fact that the soldier had made the supreme sacrifice in battle was sufficient for them to be guaranteed salvation and life everlasting. Robert Milliken, a well known social gospel preacher and president of Regina College from 1913 to 1915, wrote one of the more reflective expositions of the changing attitudes toward death in the Methodist Church in a fictionalized account of a discussion about the fate of the soldiers.²³ In discussing the "terrible price to be paid before victory comes," two clergymen pondered the question of "the salvation of the men killed suddenly in battle – one might say, cut off with scarcely a moment's reflection or warning." They had been taken with no time for a final reckoning with God. The ministers agreed that the prospect of life everlasting was not an issue for those who had grown up in the church and had openly proclaimed their faith. But they were not confident about the fate of those many lads who "never seemed to reach the point of directly declaring himself, of definitely and publicly attaching himself to a Christian life."²⁴ They acknowledged that the problem was not nearly as straightforward as it seemed. As one recognized, "our soldier lads . . . were not nearly so indifferent, or careless, or irreligious as their language, actions and general demeanor would seem to indicate."²⁵

Another chaplain explained what Milliken was trying to convey in

his story in much greater detail and, in doing so, A. C. Farrell offered one of the more balanced and sober assessments of the religion of the men at the Front. Soldiers' religious faith – a different matter from their attitude toward religious institution and formalized worship – was a very complex matter, he thought. To demonstrate the difficulty in understanding the religion of the soldier he recounted an experience that illustrated the dilemma facing the Methodist Church in its attempts to reach the battle-torn soldiers.²⁶ Upon overhearing a member of his battalion talking to a friend while they were waiting for the order to go up to the line, Farrell recalled being “stunned and revolted by their loud, filthy profane language.”²⁷ His first instinct was to turn away and leave, but instead he talked to the men. Very soon the soldier who had moments ago been indulging in the use of profane language was showing Farrell a picture of his wife and children and telling him that he had been overseas for a long time and had many close calls and narrow escapes with death, including one where three of his friends were hit and killed by an exploding shell that narrowly missed him. Then, Farrell recalled, this soldier confessed that, “I knew the power that saved me and was watching over me and I did not forget to thank Him either.” Farrell emphasized that this soldier, who had faith in a higher benevolent spirit, was the man who had been “so offensively profane” only a few moments earlier. To Farrell this incongruity was perplexing. He admitted that he did not fully understand and was not able fully to explain the apparent contradiction he discovered in many soldiers who indulged in what the Church regarded as clearly immoral behavior, but who also espoused a clear faith in God. The most important distinction that Farrell made was to point out that while the soldier's religiosity, although somehow hardened by the war, was intact, he seemed not to have much regard for the Church.

Nevertheless, in Milliken's story of changing wartime theology, the ministers agreed that “evangelical Protestantism, with its insistence on correctness of creedal belief, on church connection, and on conscious Christian experience has made the way so straight and narrow that it seems to leave comparatively little room for mercy and hope.” The yoke of such orthodoxy was a cause for “much strain,” Milliken thought; as a result, Methodism was suffering loss for it was failing to console many families who were experiencing the terrible loneliness of grief.²⁸ The story was designed to counsel a more open-minded attitude regarding the prospect of salvation within Methodism. The two clergymen discussed a sermon, entitled “the Salvation of the Slain,” in which the preacher acknowledged

that the sins of the soldier “were mostly on the surface and not by any means destructive or deadly.” The church needed to stop “attacking and holding up for reprobation these sins of the flesh, while the sins of the spirit were passed over comparatively easy.” Salvation was not a matter of church connection or subscription to creed, but rather a “general attitude and spirit of acknowledgment, of reverence, of obedience and desire toward God, toward righteousness, toward the higher things of life, as revealed in our hearts and experiences.” If these qualities were present – even in embryonic form – then there was always the possibility of salvation. More importantly, the preacher suggested that such reverence was clearly present in the soldiers, who, in “their own way,” acknowledged and bowed before God. It seemed clear that the soldier would experience salvation because “the life in the trenches facing death constantly brings with it thoughtfulness, a sense of responsibility, a power of concentration that is not possible under ordinary conditions and experiences.” The experience of soldiering, facing death, and making the supreme sacrifice was evidence or assurance enough that soldiers would enjoy life everlasting.

For many, assurance of a spiritual afterlife was not sufficient consolation. They also wondered about a physical or bodily resurrection. The circumstances of many soldiers’ deaths – being mutilated or torn apart beyond recognition or simply being lost in action in the carnage and chaos of battle – led many at the battlefield and at home to wonder if the war-torn bodies would be restored in the afterlife.²⁹ In order to deal with the horrifying thoughts of how a soldier died, there needed to be some assurance that no matter how violent, bloody, or degrading the circumstances of being killed, at the very moment of dying the soldier experienced no pain and did not suffer. It was necessary to believe, therefore, that the soldier’s body was restored so that the dead soldier would be able to experience the afterlife without any kind of torment. This belief that the soldier’s body was restored and preserved in its full vigour and beauty provided the religious or theological foundation for the flourishing of spiritualism during and immediately after the war.³⁰ In the pages of the *Christian Guardian*, one minister, Byron Stauffer, called for an end to the morbid gloominess of so much mourning and suggested the conviction that “our loved ones to be alive, now” should be openly proclaimed. Suggesting that a meeting with the bodily spirit of a soldier might be imminent, he counseled readers of the *Guardian* to “speak of your expectations of the coming meeting. Do it fearlessly. Do not fear being

called a spiritualist.”³¹ Indeed the appeal of spiritualism easily infiltrated the Methodist Church. The *Christian Guardian* printed an editorial at war’s end announcing “our great new thought of death,” in which it concurred with recent spiritualist thinkers about soldiers’ confident accounts of the after-life, in which the bodily spirit enjoyed “a future life of achievement and development and opportunity.”³²

By war’s end, many chaplains were advancing an assessment of what they had learned from their experiences with the men at the front. They concurred that the reality of modern warfare had profoundly changed anyone who had served at the battlefield. A. E. Lavell admitted that he did not realize until he had returned to Canada that “over here and over there are two different worlds.” Lavell did not claim to speak for all returned soldiers or even chaplains, but in a series of articles in the *Christian Guardian*, he suggested that there were some things that he felt certain were widely shared with respect to religion. The men had returned to Canada with a much clearer and more basic understanding of what were the essentials of Christianity. According to Lavell, the experiences soldiers encountered at the battlefield shook any confident dogmatism they might have held. “Reality is stripped . . . the treasured convictions and custom; the pomp, precedents and traditions; the burdensome clothing which has hid ghastly wrong . . . have been rent into shreds and whirled away by the hurricane of the shells and storm of this most frightful war.” Many old doctrines “seem to us neither vital nor real. They seem hollow and vain, or having nothing whatever to do with the salvation of man and the establishment of the Kingdom of our Lord.” Lavell continued that “the religion of Jesus is not at all well stated in most of the current accepted creeds, theologies, ecclesiastical institutions and practices.” He explained: “When you live in the presence of immediate danger and death; when you are called to continuous and strenuous action; and take sacrifice for granted as once you did comfort and ease you learn the difference between religion and its frills and accretions. Your creed becomes very simple. The Apostle’s Creed itself has irrelevant matter. ‘I believe in Jesus’ will do for most of us.”³³

By 1918, enough men had returned home permanently that the veterans had clearly emerged as an identifiable group in Canadian society.³⁴ The early commentators on the returned soldier were from the veteran ranks themselves and it took them little time to articulate their experiences and expectations. One anonymous Private, in an open letter in the *Christian Guardian*, criticized the Methodist Church and its

chaplains for poor spiritual advice and inadequate counseling with respect to the soldiers' bitter feelings concerning their actions in battle.³⁵ To indicate how serious the disillusionment was, this correspondent suggested that some probationers did not expect to return to the work of the ministry after they were demobilized. T. A. Wilson raised similar concerns, informing the Army and Navy Board that there prevailed "an idea that many of our probationers will not want to return to the ministry."³⁶

The Methodist Church actively tried to re-integrate its veterans into congregational life and regular worship. Overseas in the camps, a "Citizenship Campaign," under the motto "a clean life for a clean country," was initiated by Methodist chaplains to help the soldier re-acquaint himself with civilian life. But in a fashion remarkably like a nineteenth century temperance meeting, the men attending the meetings were asked to sign "pledge cards" indicating that they would dedicate their lives to clean living and abandon battlefield habits, such as swearing, drinking, gambling at cards, and other games of chance once they returned to Canada.³⁷ In Canada, trainloads of returning men were met by Methodist chaplains who forwarded letters to local ministers so that the soldier could quickly become re-established in his local church. The Methodist chaplains also held information sessions to inform the returned soldier of the upcoming referenda to continue Prohibition that were being held in many provinces. These programs seemed to indicate to the men that the Methodist Church was neither changing its ways nor listening to the soldiers' demands for a religious faith unencumbered with complicated theological or demanding moral codes. The old reliance on morality, in particular, remained prominent in Methodist teaching and activities.

The most damning critique of the Methodist Church's wartime activities came from Private C. T. Watterson of the Canadian Army Medical Corps. Watterson attended Wesley College, Winnipeg, between 1913 and 1916 and, when his studies were completed, he enlisted in the C.E.F. and was attached to the 11th Field Ambulance. He saw action at Ypres, the Somme, Vimy Ridge, Lens, Passchendale, and Amiens. On 30 December 1918, he wrote to T. A. Moore of the Army and Navy Board advising that the Methodist Church's focus on and criticism of the morality of the soldier was the source of great misunderstanding between the men and the Church. He advised that the Methodist Church would have to meet the problem of the "lax morals of the returning soldiers" with more than harkening back to the "Thou shall nots" of the old Methodist Discipline. Indeed the Church had to take some responsibility for the

moral condition of the soldier, and simply calling for “Prohibition” would be greeted with disdain. “We as a Church advised our youth to join the army. In that organization their spiritual and moral ideals have suffered a great change”; but Watterson charged that the Church was unable to deal with the moral dilemmas faced by the soldiers. Speaking as a soldier, he explained: “we can never be morally or spiritually the same as we once were. Our experiences have fashioned us so that many platitudes have forever lost their appeal. Old methods must be scrapped.”³⁸ In trying to shake up Methodism’s traditional morality, he suggested that the men who were most often venerated at the front were the “rough, hard swearing lads,” for they were the ones who “did great things because they had a fearlessness of consequences, an indifference to responsibility and the gamblers’ recklessness.” He was suggesting that these men, whose rough character was not associated with piety in Methodist circles, were indeed representative of the new activist spirit of sacrifice that the church had to embrace. “I grieve,” Watterson lamented, “at the deplorable attempt our Church . . . has made at outlining a message of sufficient vitality and courage to grip the spiritual nature of our troops overseas.”

Watterson was also sharply critical of the Methodist Church’s recent history of being “on the side of authority.” He had particular disdain for those chaplains who preached for the Union Government and the cause of conscription. Many editorials in the *Christian Guardian*, he pointed out, were “political propaganda.” He also criticized Chown’s report after his overseas visit; he thought that Chown had not fully grasped moral conditions among the soldiers because he never got sufficiently close to them. Instead he was surrounded by military and church officials who “never mix[ed] with the men in their unrestrained moments of actual army life.”³⁹ He concluded, in a fashion similar to many other chaplains and Methodist soldiers, that the majority of men in the ranks “will openly state that they have done with the church.”⁴⁰ Perhaps, but W. B. Creighton had identified a number of problems with religious faith and the church prior to the war and, in some respects, they were only persisting. Maybe what S. D. Chown discerned was not so much a sharp break from the past, but rather a continuation of the drift away from the Church that many Methodist clergy had long been worried about, especially among young men. No doubt the reasons for this drift were now also rooted in wartime disillusionment. The war did not strike a shattering blow to the Methodist Church from which it never recovered. There was no precipitous decline in attendance at worship, weekly financial offerings, mission activity, or

participation in the rites of passage. The prewar initiative of church union was picked up after the war, but with greater urgency and new rationale based on wartime experiences at the Front.⁴¹ And, as Robert Wright so capably demonstrates, there was not so much a crisis in Christian missions within the Methodist Church after the war as a re-consideration.⁴²

The key word in Chown's sermon on postwar religious conditions was "drift."⁴³ In particular, there was drift away from the Church by demobilized men. Despite the vigorous efforts of the Methodist Church to link the returning men to their churches at home and to engage them in the upcoming temperance referenda, it was clear that many veterans were not seeking to re-establish contact with the local church of their youth.⁴⁴ The most stunning indication of this was the high number of probationers and ministers who had served in the C.E.F. who simply allowed their contact with the Church to slip away. They did not make any dramatic declarations of their opposition or rejection of the Methodist Church. Instead they simply did not seek a new pastorate or decided against resuming their studies at theological college.⁴⁵ Recruiting young men for the ministry proved to be one of the more difficult challenges facing the Methodist Church after the war.⁴⁶ As we have seen, some of this disillusionment rested in the difficulties of maintaining faith in a loving and caring God. In the terrible toll of the war, both soldiers at the front and people at home sought some consolation through evidence of a God who intervened to ease pain and suffering. But, as the war dragged on and on, they struggled to discover such a God. As we have seen from what many of the chaplains wrote and the returned soldiers indicated to the Church, the drift away from the Church was more evidently a revolt against authority of the Methodist Church. Many were revolting against obedience to Methodist authority, whether in the form of regular attendance at church for Sunday worship or to the moral standards of the Methodist Discipline.⁴⁷ Echoing many others, but perhaps stating it more succinctly and forcefully, was S. R. Laycock, who had been trained as a Methodist minister, writing from a dugout in France in July 1918. "The church will have big problems after the war and she must make a mighty effort to adapt herself to changed conditions. The returned man will have considerable respect for religion but not always much for the church. The church will need to be virile & lay emphasis on brotherhood & fellowship rather than creed & ritual."⁴⁸

The war changed things for the Methodist Church, but the drift away from the Church was not a deep rejection of the Christian faith. As Private George Turpin, who was a probationer in British Columbia Conference

and did not abandon his studies, suggested after the war, “the religion of Jesus will not be confined within the walls of a church, nor the pages of a family Bible, but it will be alive in the hearts of men” who would carry out their commitment to Christianity as they did during the war by their devotion to others and willingness to make sacrifices for the hungry, needy, lonely, and abandoned in society.⁴⁹ Similarly, A. D. Robb wrote to the Reverend T. A. Moore of the Army and Navy Board: “Our experiences over here are epochal and have done for us what no Conference, no College, no Congregation could ever do for us.” He explained that, as a chaplain, he had spent over two years in close proximity to the soldiers and “they have taught me a deeper religion, a bigger brotherhood, a broader charity, than I ever knew before.” He believed that the men represented a new spirit of bravery and brotherhood that would have to be embraced by a renewed and more tolerant church. If the Methodist Church continued to preach a narrow morality that was also bereft of a broader compassion and understanding it would fail to hold the men, Robb warned.⁵⁰

As a result of the First World War, the Methodist Church of Canada faced the disruption of its moral authority, which cast many adrift without any strong institutional foundation for their faith. Many returned Methodist soldiers were religious, but they did not have a strong connection to the teachings, discipline, or authority of the Church. The chaplains were clearly suggesting that the soldiers maintained their faith, but it was a faith that was largely rooted in their experiences at the front as opposed to the creeds and doctrines of Methodism. The denominational affiliation to the Methodist Church was weakening. This loosening of ties to the Church did not translate into full-scale abandonment. Instead it created a more fluid religious landscape. Some may have engaged in spiritualist activity or experimented with the numerous fundamentalist or Pentecostal religious movements, including faith healing, that were strengthened by the war.⁵¹ Perhaps most drifted away from regular church attendance and any meaningful involvement in worship services without totally abandoning their denominational affiliation with Methodism. The First World War inaugurated the embryonic stages of what we now recognize as a society of people who are spiritual or Christian, but who have no direct religious affiliation with a church. This trend disrupted the dominance of the historic mainstream churches, such as the Methodist Church, in Canadian society. This change in the religious landscape, however, was something that took a long time to become apparent.⁵²

Endnotes

1. "War Sermon" 1915, file 486 and "The Abolition of War," n.d. [circa 1919-21], File 616, S.D. Chown Papers, United Church Archives, Toronto [hereafter UCA].
2. "The Need of Advancing Religion in a Progressive World," n.d., File 1276, S.D. Chown Papers UCA.
3. David B. Marshall, "'Khaki has become a sacred colour': The Methodist Church and the sanctification of World War I," in *Canadian Churches and the First World War*, ed. Gordon Heath (Hamilton, ON: McMaster Divinity College Press, 2014), 102-32.
4. For a good synthesis of the contrasting viewpoints, see Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 395-415.
5. See, for example, Captain J. W. Magwood, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand" *Christian Guardian* [hereafter, *CG*], 16 October 1917.
6. See Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 35-72; and Duff Crerar, *Padres in No Man's Land: Canadian Chaplains and the Great War* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 161-93.
7. A. C. Farrell to Moore, 28 December 1916, Box 8, File 219, Army and Navy Board Papers [hereafter ANB], UCA.
8. A similar argument is made by Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 187, 196-9.
9. H. E. Thomas to Moore, 5 January 1916, Box 4, File 91, ANB, UCA.
10. H. E. Thomas to Moore, n.d., received 22 March 1916, Box 4, File 91, ANB, UCA.
11. Fallis to Moore, File 15 -7 - 2, 17 May 1917, Chaplaincy Service Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.
12. A. D. Robb to Doctor Moore, 20 November 1917, Box 6, File 165, ANB, UCA.

13. Report of S. D. Chown on the Overseas Commission, "Report to Lt. Col. John Almond, D.C.S. Canadian Overseas Forces," 2 August 1917, Box 2, File 41, 27-28, ANB, UCA.
14. Report of S. D. Chown on the Overseas Commission, "Report to Lt. Col. John Almond, D.C.S. Canadian Overseas Forces," 23-26.
15. Chambers to Moore, "Report of Work in Segregation Camp Seaforth, July August 1918," 8 August 1918, Box 7, File 191, ANB, UCA.
16. H. W. Burnett to T. A. Moore, 2 January 1916, Box 4, File 95, ANB, UCA.
17. H. W. Burnett to T. A. Moore, 27 April 1916, Box 4, File 95, ANB, UCA.
18. See Neil Allison, "Free Church Revivalism and the British Army During the First World War," in *Clergy in Khaki: New Perspectives on British Army Chaplaincy in the First World War*, eds. Michael Snape and Edward Madigan (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 54.
19. Fallis, "Diary 11 Oct. 1915," *CG*, 26 April 1916.
20. "A Message from the Chaplains of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada to the Churches at Home," ANB, UCA.
21. A. D. Robb to Moore 25 June 1918, Box 10, file 256-7, ANB, UCA.
22. Private George Turpin, "By Way of the Cross," *CG*, 17 July 1918.
23. On Milliken see Phyllis Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 139-40; and James Pitsula, *For All We Have and Are: Regina and the Experience of the Great War* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 13-14, 230, 282.
24. Robert Milliken, "The Salvation of the Slain," *CG*, 6 June 1917.
25. Milliken, "The Salvation of the Slain."
26. A. C. Farrell to Moore, 28 December 1916, Box 8, File 219, ANB, UCA.
27. On slang and profanity at the front, see Tim Cook, "Fighting Words: Canadian Soldiers' Slang and Swearing in the Great War," *War in History* 20, no. 3 (2013): 323-44.
28. On pre-war attitudes to death and the importance of consolation, see David Marshall, "Death Abolished: Changing Attitudes to Death and the Afterlife in Nineteenth Century Protestant Canada," in *Transitions: Canadian Social History, 1800-1900*, ed., Norman Knowles (Toronto: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1997), 370-87.

29. See Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 233-4.
30. See David Cannadine, "War, Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain," in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (London: Europa Publications, 1981). For spiritualism in Canada, see Ramsay Cook, "Spiritualism, Science and the Earthly Paradise," *Canadian Historical Review* 65, no. 1 (March 1984): 4-27; Stan McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004); and Gillian McGinn, *Vanguards of the New Age: The Toronto Theosophical Society, 1891-1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).
31. Byron Stauffer, "Regarding Our Departed As Living," *CG*, 3 May 1916.
32. "Our Great new Thought on Death," *CG*, 4 December 1918.
33. A. E. Lavell, "The Returning Soldier and the Church: Part II He May Be Right," *CG*, 24 April 1918. See also C. Wellesley Whitaker, "When the Boys Return," *CG*, 6 February 1918.
34. For a full discussion of the First World War veteran in Canadian society, see Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
35. *CG*, 17 July 1918.
36. T. A. Wilson to Moore, 4 October 1918, Box 8, File 229, ANB, UCA.
37. Chambers to Moore, November 1918, Box 7, File 191, ANB, UCA.
38. C.T. Watterson to T. A. Moore, 30 December 1918, Box 23, File 459, ANB, UCA.
39. C.T. Watterson to T. A. Moore, 30 December 1918, Box 23, File 459, ANB, UCA.
40. See also Lieutenant Frank Crighton, "The Returning Soldier," *CG*, 12 March 1919.
41. On the prewar roots of church union see Mary Vipond, "Canadian National Consciousness and the Formation of the United Church of Canada," reprinted in *Prophets, Priests and Prodigals: Readings in Canadian Religious History*, eds., Mark McGowan and David Marshall (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992).

42. See, in particular, E. W. Wallace's comments quoted in Robert Wright, *A World Mission: Canadian Protestantism and the Quest for a New International Order* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1991), 166-8.
43. There is some statistical evidence to suggest this drift. See Phyllis 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), 10.
44. For example see the reports to the Army and Navy Board from H.W. Burnett throughout the first six months of 1919: Box 4, File 95, ANB, UCA.
45. David B. Marshall, "Methodism Embattled: A Reconsideration of the Methodist Church and World War I," *Canadian Historical Review* 46, no. 1 (March 1985): 59.
46. David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 184-5. The columns of the *Christian Guardian* were full of correspondence from Methodist clergy and probationers who had served in the C.E.F. outlining their difficulties with the Church.
47. See also Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Pearson Longman, 2006), 112; and Jonathan Ebel, "The Great War, Religious Authority, and the American Fighting Man," *Church History* 78 (March 2009): 99-133. Both authors argue that a major source of the soldiers' rebellion against Church authority rested in its strict moralism.
48. S. R. Laycock to Arthur Barner, 27 July 1918, and then forwarded to A.B. Moore, 2 January 1919, ANB, UCA. For Laycock's postwar career as an educator and child psychologist, see Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling, and the Family in Postwar Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). Laycock thought that he could serve God better in improving the lot of humanity by serving outside the Church (39).
49. George Turpin, "After the War," *CG*, 29 August 1917.
50. A. D. Robb to Moore, 25 June 1918, Box 10, File 256, ANB, UCA.
51. Links between the war and numerous forms of evangelical Protestantism are suggested by Robert Burkinshaw, *Pilgrims in Lotus Land: Conservative Protestantism in British Columbia, 1917-1981* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); and James Opp, *The Lord for the Body: Religion, Medicine & Protestant Faith Healing in Canada, 1880-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

52. See the concluding remarks in Philip Jenkins, *The Great War and the Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 377.

