

## **Action Research on the Possibilities of Tangential Research: An Opportunity to Explore Prospectively in that Uncatalogued Box**

SHARON BOWLER  
Tyndale College and Seminary

---

Action research is a process whereby the researcher becomes the subject within their own study. This essay is a reflection on the opportunity I recently had to work with a number of historians on a book entitled *Canadian Baptist Women*. Although this paper is specific to my current work, the resulting reflection on this work has allowed me to propose a research model that I hope will form a useful model for future works.

In reflecting on both the process that had the Canadian Baptist Historical Society initiate the work and the writers that either stepped forward to write or stepped back from the process, I sought to reflect on a model that might explain the book's development that would be useful for future historical endeavours. At this point, I am in no way able to analyze whether my perceptions of the process truly reflected those of my co-writer colleagues, but that does not really matter. What I am proposing within this paper is that, although the action research process was instrumental in my developing a model, it was this product, a historical research model, that seems most useful.

Over several years I attended with great interest the annual meetings of both the Canadian Baptist Historical Society and the Canadian Society of Church History. I noticed that questions were often posed to presenters that were at the periphery or tangential to their research. Often it seemed that the questioners had some interest either because of their own research focus, or a tangent that the speaker struck within their presentation, or with

*Historical Papers 2015: Canadian Society of Church History*

a memory of a “box of uncatalogued” research that was left closed. When I presented my papers on several occasions I noted that I had been asked about the women in my very male-focussed research, and I noted the same had happened with other speakers.

When the Canadian Baptist Historical Society executive were seeking book topics, I very innocently suggested that they try to answer the questions they kept raising about women and produce a third volume in their series of historical research. Little did I know that I would be asked to edit that volume, for my own research focus on Protestant conscience with nineteenth-century male subjects did not quite match the task. I did, however, decide to accept.

I have to acknowledge that I was selective in sending out initial invitations to those who, at prior meetings, raised questions about Baptist women for any number of reasons. I also used these meeting participants’ suggestions as to others that might be invited to contribute. Invitations were extended to those historians interested in researching well-known or little-known Canadian Baptist women from across the country and across a wide time span.

Chapters were received exploring a broad number of issues and aspects of local church, home, and international mission and family life. The influence of Baptist faith was visible within each chapter in some manner that allowed for the exploration of topics that incorporated original research and provided a synthesis of research that might further inform our readers’ understanding of aspects of Canadian Baptist women’s lives.

The book includes a number of works by historians from across Canada:

Marguerite Van Die  
Queens University

**Foreword**

Hannah M. Lane  
Mount Allison

**Eastern Canada**

“Brethren and Sisters”: Gender, Family, and Baptist Churches in Mid-Nineteenth Century New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Maine

Patricia Townsend  
Archivist, Acadia

Maritime Women’s Long Road to Ordination

Sharon Leighton Acadia	“A Scotch Terrier Worrying an Elephant”: Miriam Ross in the Congo
<b><u>Quebec</u></b>	
Sharon Bowler CBHS	Madame Lore, A Baptist Beginning
<b><u>Ontario</u></b>	
Wendy Porter McMaster	A Women’s Quartet and an Anonymous Gospel Choir: The Remarkable Lives and Ministry of Black Baptist Women in Late- Nineteenth-Century
Marilyn Whiteley Independent Historian	Isabel Crawford: Missionary to Native Americans
<b><u>Western Canada</u></b>	
Callum Jones Pastor, Penticton, BC	“[O]ur women have wrought loyally”: Baptist Women, Their Roles, Their Organi- zation, and Their Contribution in Western Canada Between 1907 and 1940
Paul R. Dekar Memphis Theol. Seminary Mary Flemming	Lois Althea Tupper, Pioneer Theological Educator

It was interesting to note that many of our writers indicated that their chapter focus inspired them to commit to continued research on their topic, and it is anticipated that several new books and papers will be published in the near future. With this outcome noted, I can truly say that, even prior to publishing, this book has already been a very successful endeavour.

The title of this paper, “Action Research on the Possibilities of Tangential Research: An Opportunity to Prospectively Explore in that Uncatalogued Box,” highlights four areas of personal questioning. First, how do I explain what it means to have “An Opportunity to Explore”? Second, why do I define our research as “Tangential”? Third, why do I look upon our work from the perspective of an “Uncatalogued Box”? And fourth, how have these three aspects guided me towards using a prospective analysis methodology?

*An Opportunity to Explore*

In this section, I am building on some of the information that I have shared in this paper's introduction. The need to explore the book's beginnings is useful. Without analyzing the manner in which this book came to be and the history of each chapter, it may seem strange to say that a book has provided an opportunity to explore. For the most part, the research that has taken place for each chapter has come about because of a direct invitation that justified or gave permission to tackle a history that has been untold. This fact is quite striking and requires some research to explore why academic-based Baptist women's histories have been lacking.

In listening to fellow historians presenting both informally or formally with regard to their research focus, there were times when questions about women were asked and subsequent stories shared with regard to materials that were and still remain sitting in personal files, archives, or unpublished manuscripts.

Most writers who accepted the challenge to change direction from their primary research focus did so because they had some prior connection to the book's topic. Some writers had research that lay uncovered by choice, for a number of differing reasons including a lack of interest by others in the past. Some writers understood the need to pursue the topic and made significant changes personally and professionally to commit to the book. Some writers had wonderful intentions, ideas, and access to materials, but, for a number of reasons, found that they could not proceed with their work. It is hoped that, with the publishing of the book, these unfinished research beginnings will once again be picked up and used in a future volume on the same topic.

The exploration of the array of power struggles and the powerful leadership that Baptist women have experienced in following their call to serve the Lord becomes very evident in many of the chapters. This same range of hegemony exists in Baptist history itself. Specifically, the history of Baptist women historiography deserves analysis. Hegemony within historiography in general and then within faith groups has affected the history of religion and faith. The process of working on this book provided a necessary opportunity to begin to research beyond the barriers at both the micro and macro levels and, at the same time, hopefully will inspire other research that may have been impeded in the past.

### ***Tangential Research***

Historical research involves designing and/or using a process to target and analyze a specific knowledge base. Tangential research allows for the meaningful straying from process and/or product and honours the altering or drifting inquiry that all researchers experience from time to time. Tangential research provides the opportunity to stray beyond goal and methodology and fills an important void in either historical research process or product.

I wish to provide a specific example from my own research focus that illustrates the tangential path that I took in writing a chapter for this book. I believe it is one that many of you would be able to relate to and one that many of our chapter writers have explored to various extents. My work using a microhistorical perspective with the goal of uncovering the varied aspects and depth of Protestant conscience relied on my focus on one nineteenth-century doctor who trained during the cholera epidemic in Quebec. At the periphery of my research were a number of Baptist men and women whom I could not explore for a number of reasons, including time, research focus, and methodology, and the seemingly digressive and superficial nature of widening the study.

When I was asked to become the editor for the text, naturally I wanted to submit a chapter. I purposefully examined my prior work and took a calculated, well-planned tangent into the peripheral dimension in both method and focus and began researching the life of a Baptist woman who cared for the sick during the cholera epidemic.

The experience of writer and editor also placed me in a unique position of becoming an action researcher and had me questioning and analyzing both my own experience and the experience of my fellow researchers. Purposely allowing myself to take my own invitation gave me the permission and inspiration I needed to follow along a research tangent. Altering both methodology and focus resulted in an opportunity to explore meaningful and insightful data about Baptist women and, at the same time, allowed me a unique opportunity to analyze the process that led myself and the other writers into and through this process.

### ***An Uncatalogued Box***

In order to broaden historical research, specifically in the area of Canadian Baptist women, I am suggesting that it requires a calculated tangential research methodology and focus. While many of us have acquired information from that uncatalogued box or catalogued but long

forgotten box, might I suggest that there is nothing serendipitous in our finding, nor our use, of that box. No one can deny that no matter how powerful data might be, skill is required to analyze it. Even accidental discoveries require a competent discoverer to recognize the merits of a new possibility.

My focus on the uncatalogued box is not from the perspective of the chance finding of material, but on the tangential nature of the wealth of information about religion and faith that has gone purposefully unvalued and unrecognized. Our work on the book *Canadian Baptist Women* has provided us with firsthand action research based examples of how difficult it is in some cases to acquire information and how some information sources are generally not used or even sought after. If data that has been archived or tucked away is undervalued, potential research on specific topics will remain unexplored. Canadian Baptist women have remained a neglected area of research and, if our work inspires others to tangentially seek out those uncatalogued boxes, then our effort has been a success.

### ***Impacts on Research Methodology***

The last three subsections – exploration, tangential research, and uncatalogued boxes – have highlighted some of the action research type focus that I continue to engage in throughout the book process. There is more, however, to the research methodology employed in the writing of this book that needs to be acknowledged. Chapter contributors were encouraged to share ideas with one another and some did take the opportunity to do so. Their work then became extensions of each others' endeavours. Also, contributing historians were given an open historical period and focus for their research and this resulted in a book that touches on a variety of topics and themes.

The book explores a selection of voices and work that have had an impact on faith and beyond in Canadian Baptist women's answers to God's call in their lives. In order more fully to understand the research methodology employed I need to revisit the words used in my invitation letter to potential researchers:

This book will seek to document the broad experience of Canadian Baptist women whose Baptist faith has played a significant role in helping them to respond in varied ways to the personal and professional exigencies of life with a sense of hope, support, and direction that has mobilized the improvement of individuals and society in

varied aspects of public, corporate, private and spiritual life. This is a much needed volume which aims to provide an authoritative source of inspiration, celebration, and insight into a variety of Baptist women's issues throughout Canadian history.

Basically, at the outset of this endeavour I set for myself as editor the goal of systematically synthesizing the contributed chapters into a whole. In meeting this goal, I have relied on my past research experience using a research methodology that I have labelled prospective focused historical analysis. To place this into context for you, I have tried to glean from historical research some form of guidance in a very action-research-based manner. The following example might help illustrate how my research methodology employed as a historian is indeed altered by my own research. In considering the words of Reverend R.W. Evans written in the *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette* on 20 March 1841, I actually sought to find a research methodology that could honour his ideas. His challenge to me was as follows:

The study of antiquity, if pursued in the proper spirit, cannot but be a most profitable study. The mere collection indeed of dead facts and of obsolete fragments, is as useless as it is foolish, but when it is accomplished by a spirit which, by means of these materials, can cement the present times to the past, and draw reasonable omens respecting the future, it is both useful and wise.

I have employed these words as the philosophical framework underpinning all of my research, including this work on Canadian Baptist women. In analyzing each of the submitted chapters, I employ a coding system to identify themes and outcomes with the purpose of studying the experiences of the past for the purpose of learning in the present and future. I base this method on the challenges Neil Postman has left to educators and historians. Postman, in advocating for his use of historical analysis, in his book *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, has inspired me to look on this history of Canadian Baptist women from Postman-like perspective:

If looking ahead means anything, it must mean finding in our past useful and humane ideas with which to fill the future . . . What else is history for if not to remind us about our better dreams? . . . They are not strange ideas. They are still close to us. They are not all that

difficult to remember. I suggest we try to reclaim some of them, with this provision . . . only that we use it for what it is worth and for all it is worth . . . in order that we may better understand what suits us. Let us look there for instruction rather than models. Let us adopt the principles rather than the details.

If I truly believe the words that I included in my invitation to researchers – that “this is a much needed volume which aims to provide an authoritative source of inspiration, celebration, and insight into a variety of Baptist women’s issues throughout Canadian history” – then my call is to employ or at least inspire in our readers a Postman-like method of historical analysis that I label as prospective focused historical analysis.

If our study of Canadian Baptist women’s history is to mean anything in relation to future endeavours in answering God’s call, it must mean that our past should be searched and analyzed in a manner that informs our present and future. God’s call should not be strange to us, nor should the call received by others past or present be one to which we have trouble relating. With this book I place a challenge to seek out past experiences for purposes of instruction in order to understand the principles, challenges, and solutions that we need to consider as we seek and follow God’s call in our lives.

In analyzing the book as a whole, readers should be given the opportunity to be directed toward religious and faith issues in order that Christian workers might be better able to fill both the present and future with workable ideas and goals, and find something meaningful in connecting to both the loss and celebrations experienced in times past. The history of Canadian Baptist women provides us with an opportunity to examine a rich wealth of knowledge and experience that can profitably inform all whose path seeks to answer God’s call both in the present and future.