

The Rise and Fall (and Resilience) of the Peace Movement Among Presbyterians and the United Church in the Interwar Years, 1919-1939

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The post-war years were uncertain and filled with angst. Nations clashed, democracies fumbled, and economies struggled. The Western world was in perpetual crisis, and countless book titles with words such as “decline,” “decadence,” “catastrophe,” and “sickness” expressed the sense of uncertainty and alarm for the future.¹ Long held views on economics, morals, art, politics, and religion were in flux, including views related to war.² Canadians were not immune to the uncertainty, and, during the interwar years, Presbyterians and United Church members (and, for a brief time, Methodists)³ experienced a dramatic shift in discourse surrounding war, and radical revisions were proposed as ways forward in a war-torn world. During and immediately after the Great War those denominations were – at least in their public statements – firmly in the just war tradition. However, throughout the twenties and thirties an increasing number grew disenchanted with notions of a “just war” and were quite vocal in advocating against supporting any war for any reason. Others, though, were not as enamoured with pacifist notions. The outbreak of war yet again in 1939 was met with a unified just war response by the Presbyterian Church of Canada (PCC), but the United Church of Canada (UCC) was deeply divided over support for the war.

This paper explores the trajectory of and motives for that fluidity between the two world wars (1919-1939), as well as identifying the

reasons for very different reactions as war loomed in 1939. Before church union in 1925, attention is directed to Presbyterians and Methodists, and post-union the focus is on the PCC and the UCC.⁴ The sources for this research are the official denominational statements of the UCC, PCC, and Methodists, as well as the denominational magazines *Christian Guardian* (Methodist), *Presbyterian Witness*, *Presbyterian Record*, *New Outlook* (UCC), and *Observer* (UCC).⁵ One difficulty with sources is that after 1925 the PCC was in survival mode, preoccupied with its survival after losing two-thirds of its members. Not surprisingly, in the years following 1925, significant attention in the denominational press and meetings was paid to issues related to church struggles, with little time and space for other issues such as international affairs. That being the case, there is still enough material to provide glimpses of PCC attitudes to war and peace.

A comment on the term “pacifism” is in order. As Thomas Socknat notes, Canadian pacifism was a widely diverse movement, with both religious and secular motivations.⁶ There was also a spectrum of Christian opinion, from sectarian pacifists (historic peace churches, or anyone who would not support the use of force for any reason) to liberal reformist pacifists (who were elated with international developments for peace, but were willing to support the use of force as a last resort). To distinguish between the two in the following analysis, the expression (absolute) pacifist will refer to the former and (internationalist) pacifist to the latter. Pacifism simply refers to both.

A few preliminary words are also necessary on the role of the press. This paper explores the range of views among the PCC and UCC primarily through the pages of their denominational periodicals. The religious press played a unique role in the life of the churches besides providing news and devotional material for the faithful. While it is difficult to know just how representative the papers were when it came to views in the pews (or pulpits for that matter), what is certain is that they embraced their role as a nation-building medium, seeking to shape views of events to inform and motivate Christian engagement on pressing issues.⁷

The range, fluidity, and diversity of UCC and PCC responses to war and peace during the interwar period reflects the optimism and pessimism of the age, as well as important differences in denominational trajectories and traditions. The UCC and PCC shared similar impulses for peace, as well as an internationalist vision for the role of the church in developing conditions conducive for peace, but there were also dissimilarities.

Interwar pacifism had broad appeal because it was a widely diverse movement, with (absolute) pacifists sharing the euphoria of outlawing war with (internationalist) pacifists. Their rhetoric and methods had much in common, and thus initially both had wide appeal, but, as war with Nazi Germany loomed, the differences among pacifists became more apparent with every German annexation. Support for (internationalist) pacifism was evident in both the PCC and UCC, but (absolute) pacifism only found fertile soil in the UCC. An amalgam of diverse ideas, traditions, and assumptions within the UCC created an identity marked by theological innovation and diversity that directly contributed to support for (absolute) pacifism, while church union in 1925 made for a conservative and relatively uniform PCC, unwilling to adjust or abandon its core Presbyterian identity associated with the just war tradition.

I. What They Shared

The following are areas of common experience, where the PCC and UCC shared similar discourse and trajectories.

Support for the First World War

By the autumn of 1914, nearly all of Canada was “enthusiastically dedicated” to the cause against the Central Powers.⁸ Following a pattern and precedent established during the South African War just over a decade earlier,⁹ most Canadian churches responded “without hesitation to the national cause” and supported the war effort.¹⁰ The lofty goals of the war were to save civilization from German militarism and stop the Turkish genocide of the Armenians. It was also hoped that the sacrifice of the war would lead to a future without war.¹¹ On the home front, the social gospel agenda and war effort were amalgamated, and it had been hoped that the war effort would contribute to social reform and the Christianization of the nation.¹² As the role of churches shifted from providing wartime motivation to post-war consolation, religious services and memorials contributed to the construction of memory, meaning, and myth that provided comfort for the grieving.¹³ Post-war Methodists and Presbyterians continued to proclaim support for the war effort, and key dates such as Armistice Day or battle commemorations were natural times for statements of support.¹⁴

Postwar Disillusionment

In the years immediately following the war, it became obvious that the “war to end all wars” had not solved the blight of warfare; in fact, the world remained a dangerous place of vicious conflicts that vexed those seeking peace. Reporting could swing from one extreme to another.¹⁵ However, despite initial optimism,¹⁶ the trend was towards pessimism. In the words of one commentator: “That Canada, in common with other nations affected by the war, is facing one of the most critical periods of her history no sane observer can for a moment doubt.”¹⁷ The papers reported on a plethora of conflicts, and, not surprisingly, every new conflict eroded the initial postwar optimism. And with that erosion of confidence came questions about the efficacy and morality of any war, even one deemed to be “just.”

“A Creed for Believers in a Warless World,” published by the Commission on International Justice and Goodwill of the Federal Council of Churches, was indicative of the winds of change in the early 1920s. That ten-point creed calling for a warless world summarized the beliefs of a growing number who were distressed by the war’s failure to live up to its promises, and movements for peace and even the abolition of war began to be birthed.¹⁸ In Britain, there was widespread discontent among churches over their unabashed support for the Great War, and in the 1920s religious discourse mirrored much of the anti-war *zeitgeist*, whether secular or religious in origin.¹⁹ By the end of the twenties, in the spirit of bestsellers like *All Quiet On the Western Front* (1929) and *Goodbye to All That* (1929), PCC and UCC members expressed their growing discontent with war and its supposed results, and they were supported by a growing pacifist movement within Canada,²⁰ as well as in liberal Protestant reform circles.²¹

The trend in church discourse was towards an internationalist vision, inspired by notions of international brotherhood and organizations that transcended nationalist tribalism. That internationalism had inherent tensions, for in its ranks were (absolute) pacifists who desired international peace but who would never take up the sword for any reason, and (internationalist) pacifists who likewise desired international peace but who would – as a last resort – support the use of the sword to stop aggressor nations.²² Nevertheless, both groups of “pacifists” were elated with trajectories and organizations for peace in the 1920s. Their rhetoric for peace was virtually the same, making it difficult throughout the interwar years to identify who belongs to what camp.

Commentators in the 1920s were acutely aware of the complex issues

related to the origins of armed conflict. The veritable flood of articles in the denominational literature in the twenties that questioned or outright rejected traditional notions of a just war and embraced pacifism were motivated primarily by the social gospel and the experience of the First World War. Views were in flux, and the just war tradition was increasingly questioned.²³ There were occasions for advocating for the outlawing of war, such as the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of war.²⁴ The defections from the just war tradition of two prominent proponents of the allied cause in the Great War – S. D. Chown, Methodist Superintendent, and William B. Creighton, editor of *Christian Guardian* – gave further impetus to the pacifist trajectory. The open promotion of pacifism in the pages of the *Christian Guardian* in early 1924 led to relief for pacifists but alarm for those who sought to defend the just war tradition.²⁵ While the discourse of the war against the Central Powers was often infused by the social gospel vision for justice, by the mid-twenties the social gospel perspective had evolved to see war as a primary cause of injustice. The movement had a range of perspectives within its ranks – conservative to radical – and what many, especially the radical wing, were convinced of was a wholesale rejection of the war system. Informed in no small measure by the social gospel's analysis of economic systems, war was increasingly understood to be a result of wide-ranging factors: nationalism, unresolved social ills, an unjust economic order, failure to apply Christianity to social and political affairs, a war mentality, human greed, divided Christendom, the portrayal of war as glorious, and the arms race.²⁶ Those causes of war were quite similar to those noted in *The Christian and War: An Appeal* (1926), authored by a group of Montreal clergymen,²⁷ as well as in *Toward the Christian Revolution* (1936), a collection of essays by those sympathetic to the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order.²⁸

Driving the evolution of views on war even further was the cost of the past war, and fears of yet even further devastation. The cost in human lives had been staggering: over eight million dead and twenty-one million wounded, out of sixty-five million mobilized.²⁹ Those numbers do not include the genocide of over one million Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks or the tens of millions who died in the post-war Spanish Influenza. Canada eventually sent close to 620,000 troops (roughly eight percent of the population) and experienced 60,000 dead and 173,000 injured.³⁰ The effects of technological advances on the battlefield, as well as the commitment of total war, had made war more destructive than ever imagined or experienced. The waging of the next war consumed considerable military attention and haunting visions fuelled

popular fears.³¹ War needed to be avoided at all costs, for, in the words of commentators, if “another world war comes . . . European civilization will be almost obliterated from the earth,”³² and it would “far eclipse in its desolating effects the wildest dream of the militarist.”³³

Growing Optimism for a Warless World

Optimism was palpable by the mid-to-late 1920s. It seemed a perfect storm of events had developed that gave hope to those longing and advocating for a warless world. Perhaps the “war to end all wars” would finally live up to its promise, and war would be no more.

A primary cause for growing optimism was the birth of the League of Nations, with one commentator bemoaning that “If there had been such a League in 1914 we suspect that even Germany, with all her preparation, would hardly have dared to declare war.”³⁴ Chown called it “the most outstanding political achievement related to the Kingdom of God that the world has ever seen.”³⁵ Others also extolled the league, and hoped that it would bring order and peace to the international order.³⁶ Canadian churches were exhorted to be a “powerful ally” of the League, and “an extensive campaign should be inaugurated at once” to support its work.³⁷ Distress was expressed over the USA’s refusal to ratify joining the League.³⁸

Concomitant with the maturation of the League of Nations were positive developments moving nations toward disarmament and the outlawing of war. By the mid-twenties, growing optimism about the future was evident due to international developments such as the Washington Conference (1921-22) and the Locarno Treaty (1926). Nations burdened by war debt and the ongoing costs of the military could find relief from rapidly escalating costs, and a never-ending cycle of war preparations could be broken by disarmament and treaty limitations of weaponry.³⁹ However, it was the Kellogg Peace Treaty (1928), or “The Pact of Paris,” with its outlawing of war as a means of resolving disputes that was considered “the greatest international gesture towards peace which the world ever witnessed.”⁴⁰ It was also a turning point for outright renunciations of support for any conflict.⁴¹

The Role of the Church in Making Peace Possible

What was ultimately required for peace to take root was the work of the church to Christianize people, organizations, and economic systems. The way

forward was a symbiotic relationship between international organizations like the League of Nations and the church. The Kingdom of God was deemed to transcend national identities and prejudices, and thus the spread of the Kingdom was the ideal way forward in creating a willingness to make peace and live in unity with a universal brotherhood.⁴² World missions were deemed to be able to provide much needed assistance in quelling international tensions.⁴³ For instance, the most effective way of keeping Japan from “becoming totally drunken with the lust for power and conquest” was by spreading the gospel in Japan.⁴⁴

Such expansive notions of Christianizing the international order required an intensive effort by local churches. As Chown stated, “The League of Nations . . . lays the duty upon the Church to turn the hearts of all peoples unto Christ as the only means of escaping an impossible future.”⁴⁵ Churches were to “enter on a new Crusade” to educate their members for peace through sermons, Bible studies, and special services.⁴⁶ For example, in the days before the Washington Conference it was suggested that churches make Sunday, 6 November 1921, “a day of special prayer and pleading for world-wide peace.”⁴⁷ A year later, churches were encouraged to designate 24 December 1922 as World Peace Sunday.⁴⁸ Church members were also encouraged to talk to their friends, encourage their pastors to preach on peace, work with the local church to organize peace events, and basically use all the means at their disposal to nurture a will to peace that could undergird efforts to make peace possible.⁴⁹ The UCC especially embraced a vision for a new world order based on Christian principles.⁵⁰ The need for the churches to do their part for international peace only intensified in the 1930s, especially as the actions of Japan in China, Italy in East Africa, and the escalating demands of Nazi Germany threatened to undo any gains towards outlawing war. It was hoped that even last-ditch efforts could avert a disastrous war, such as when around the crisis over Czechoslovakia the UCC committee The Church and International Relationships provided an extensive to-do list for “Peace Education” and “Peace Action.”⁵¹

Growing Alarm in the “Dark Valley”

The appeal of pacifism and the possibility of outlawing war was put to the test as international tensions rose precipitously in the next decade, a period aptly described as a “Dark Valley.”⁵² By the mid-1930s there were contradictory trends. On the one hand, there continued to be a bevy of articles (mainly

in the UCC denominational press) calling for the outlawing of war, and the arguments remained basically the same as they had been in the twenties: war was considered to be contrary to Christianity, settled nothing, and threatened civilization and Christendom.⁵³ An unholy economic trinity of the financial costs of war, the economic system (capitalism), and the “war system” (collusion of militarism and industrialists) was determined to be a primary cause of war.⁵⁴ The role of the church in the transformation of individuals (and thus society) was still considered to be critical if pacifism, democracy, and freedom were to prevail.⁵⁵ Such appeals seemed even more urgent with war clouds looming.

On the other hand, international tensions undermined pacifist aspirations. Pacifism in Britain was being abandoned, American pacifists were divided over whether or not some war could be justified, and pacifism in Canada was “severely shaken” by world events.⁵⁶ John Webster Grant rightly claims that the rising tensions “broke the unity of the movement irreparably.”⁵⁷ By 1936, the Treaty of Versailles, the Locarno Pact, and the League of Nations, were basically dead.⁵⁸ It was a tumultuous and anxiety-filled political landscape; Italy and Japan were in an expansive mood, Germany had openly begun its re-armament process, and the western democracies were paralysed as to what to do.⁵⁹ As pressures mounted, and war seemed more likely, pacifists faced even more pressure to defend a position that was increasingly seen by some to be untenable. In the months before the outbreak of war in Europe, prayers were urged, repentance was called for, and hope was offered, for another war seemed certain.⁶⁰

II. Where They Differed, and Why

Not surprisingly, the PCC and UCC shared in much of the *zeitgeist* of the day related to optimism for peace and the outlawing of war. Interwar pacifism was a widely diverse movement, with (absolute) pacifists unwilling to support any war for any reason sharing the euphoria of outlawing war with (internationalist) pacifists willing to do all they could to end war – but not willing to renounce war as a last resort. Their rhetoric was often similar, but as war with Germany loomed, the differences among pacifists became more apparent with every German annexation. The responses of the UCC reveal a mix of absolute and internationalist pacifists, whereas the pacifist impulse in the PCC seems to have been primarily of the internationalist type. The outbreak of war was the catalyst for those differences to surface.

PCC Never Abandoned the Just War Tradition

A close reading of PCC commentary on the rise of pacifism and calls for an outlawing of war reveals that, while there was optimism for arbitration, disarmament, and the outlawing of war, there remained a grim realism about the possible need for war as a last resort.⁶¹ During the years of optimism, when it looked like the League of Nations would be able to forge a way for disarmament to become a reality, support was expressed for efforts to help make conditions that would further the cause of peace. Yet, becoming an absolute pacifist was considered to be beyond the range of acceptable options. As one commentator wrote:

There can be no doubt about the deepening conviction in all branches of the Christian Church that war as a means of settling international disputes is not only contrary to the will of Christ and foreign to His spirit, utterly futile as a means of securing permanent peace. [However, despite some presbyteries moving towards pacifism] the *Church does not take the position that no circumstances can justify armed resistance to unlawful aggression or inaction in the face wrong and suffering inflicted upon the weak and defenseless*. But it reiterates with all its power and passion that war is not Christ's method of bringing in His Kingdom, and that it is fundamentally alien to the spirit of brotherhood which he came to establish on earth.⁶²

Elsewhere it was stated the aggression of Germany and its allies in the Great War had taught the obvious lesson that sometimes war was needed to stop bellicose nation.⁶³ Those same convictions remained in the church's discourse into the 1930s.

Alarmed by the voices advocating for churches to renounce war no matter the cause, especially in the context of rising of fascism, the editor of the *Presbyterian Record* directly addressed the issue. In 1934, he printed verbatim the words of James Snowden, editor of the US *Presbyterian Banner* (Pittsburgh), making it clear that the Presbyterian position on the issue had already been settled:

Pacifists in the current sense of the term are not simply lovers of peace and haters of war, for we are all that, but are those who are opposed to the use of any force in the defence of the country. Presbyterian ministers and elders who take this position and help to rush through the General

Assembly resolutions declaring that they “break with the war system” and will “cross no boundary” in defence of the country *should remember that they subscribed to a different doctrine when they accepted our Confession of Faith.*⁶⁴

Reference was made to Chapter XXIII of the *Confession Faith* that detailed the role of the magistrate to use the sword for justice. In other words, novelty was out; to be a faithful Presbyterian was to be committed to the just war tradition. A summary of the Fifteenth General Council Alliance of Reformed Churches that met in Montreal in 1937 gives further evidence of the appeal of pacifism, as well as reactions against such a drift. The council made it clear that it supported moves towards peace and disarmament and the Pact of Paris and League of Nations, and decried the arms race, but at the same time it could not entirely renounce war (despite the fact that some, so it seemed, wanted to).⁶⁵ After commentary on the contents of the council, the *Presbyterian Record* editor chimed in to let readers know of his disapproval of some of the council’s choice of words that sounded too pacifist.

It is noteworthy that the PCC General Assembly in the 1930s did not pass a single statement renouncing war. The UCC, on the other hand, published four.⁶⁶ That said, renouncing war did find support among some Presbyterians. For instance, in 1932, John Service extolled the aims and accomplishments of the League of Nations, as well as echoed the call from others for the church to make the work of the League possible. He denounced war in language that mirrored that of absolute pacifists:

War is the Maddest Folly of the Ages. The empires of the old world have always been founded on or by means of force, and in the long run their power has depended on the sword. BUT WHAT CAN WAR EVER PROVE? You may compel men’s bodies by force, but you cannot so convince their minds. To win in war is no more a sign that right has triumphed than it is a sign that a man is a follower of Jesus because he is a millionaire, or that a man is a scoundrel because he is poor. WAR IS THE GREATEST OF ALL MISTAKES, AND WE NEED A LEAGUE TO DELIVER US FROM THAT. The Kingdom of God is to extend over the whole world; but Jesus would not found it on force. It is a Kingdom based on love, and a true League of Nations must rest its power on brotherhood.⁶⁷

Another example of pacifism came from Saskatchewan. The Synod of

Saskatchewan brought an overture to the PCC Assembly in Montreal in 1935, entitled "Desire for Peace among the Nations."⁶⁸ The "principle of the prayer" in the overture was approved, while the entire item was referred to the Committee on Evangelism and Church Life and Work.⁶⁹ A year later, in the PCC General Assembly in Hamilton, the Committee gave a report on its deliberations regarding the overture. While it supported in principle the goal of cooperating with others for peace, it was also decidedly pessimistic of the League of Nations and critical of other nations' willingness to work for peace. The circumstances of 1930 led to a reappraisal of liberal optimism and a return to Reformed "realism."⁷⁰ And that note of realism is obvious in the Committee's response.⁷¹ Apparently, the actions of Japan, Italy, and especially Germany, had shattered much of the longed-for international cooperation for peace. It was hoped, however, that vigorous evangelism would change enough hearts to create conditions that would make calls for disarmament and a love of neighbor possible. That was the first and last overture for peace in the PCC.

There are a number of questions surrounding the resiliency of the just war tradition among Presbyterians. Did the social gospel remain a significant shaper of Presbyterian theology in the years following church union?⁷² How all-consuming was the "survival and reconstruction" mode in the post-union years, and did that focus on rebuilding after the devastating losses of 1925 detract from theological innovation and speculation.⁷³ And just how conservative were the remaining members of the PCC?⁷⁴ At the moment, there does not seem to be a consensus on answers to these questions. But what is clear is that a significant reason for the PCC not embracing (absolute) pacifism revolved around the issue of identity, which in the 1920s and 1930s was fused to the crisis of church union.

Perhaps the most significant factor as to why the PCC did not embrace (absolute) pacifism lies in the intersection of pacifism with historic Presbyterian identity, an identity under duress. Despite the optimism for peace, it is not entirely surprising that (absolute) pacifism did not take root in the PCC. There was no significant pacifist movement in the reformed tradition, and thus the surging peace movement did not resonate with a pre-existing body of Presbyterian pacifists. But more importantly, (absolute) pacifism directly contradicted the creeds of the church, something commented on a number of times. As noted above, the editor of the *Presbyterian Record* made sure he reminded readers that loyalty to the Presbyterian church required loyalty to the creeds of the church: "Pacifists . . . should remember that they subscribed to a different doctrine when they accepted our *Confession of Faith*."⁷⁵ Those

creeds, it was noted, affirmed the state's legitimate use of the sword. The issue of loyalty to the creeds was all the more pressing due to the recent loss of members to the UCC. Those Presbyterians who refused to enter into church union did so, in part, because of their loyalty to the historic Reformed creeds and their Presbyterian heritage and identity. Presbyterian identity had been threatened by church union, making loyalty to the church's "enduring witness"⁷⁶ more pressing, and any departures highly suspect and very improbable. Stated differently, it is no small wonder that Presbyterians who were not willing to abandon their Presbyterian identity and *Confession of Faith* during the church union debates were not about to do so a few years later by embracing a radically new creed on war and peace.

As a loyal member of the empire, Canada declared war on Germany on 10 September 1939. The pattern of church responses to the conflict mirrored that of the First World War, albeit without the same degree of enthusiasm; the British entered into it "soberly and rather sadly"⁷⁷ and in Canada it was deemed a "messy but necessary job."⁷⁸ In that sense the pacifist impulse had contributed to a chastened and reformed just war position. Not surprisingly, the PCC remained faithful to its creedal commitment to the just war tradition. And the war against Hitler was deemed in the PCC to be a just war.⁷⁹ In perhaps a jibe at pacifists, one author wrote, "What we attempt is not a theoretical discussion of this matter. Europe is beyond theory now and so is the British Empire."⁸⁰ It was believed that Britain and its allies had done everything possible to avoid war, and that force was considered to be the only option left to defend liberty and justice. There was no public debate or well-known dissenting voices in the PCC over support for the nation's war effort, and in the coming months commentary in the *Presbyterian Record* and resolutions from the General Assembly made it clear that – at least officially and publicly – Presbyterians were supportive of the nation's war effort, as they always had been.⁸¹

UCC Had a Significant Number that Embraced Absolute Pacifism

Like many of the American liberal socially conscious churches during the Second World War,⁸² the UCC was divided over the question of pacifism. The majority of UCC leaders supported the war effort, but there was a significant number of dissenters urging the church to refuse to do so.⁸³ After Canada declared war, the UCC's Presbyteries met and approved the position taken by the Executive of General Council in its expression of loyalty to the

Canadian government. All Presbyteries did so, but with minority voices of dissent.⁸⁴ Upset with the UCC's decision, sixty-eight ministers issued a manifesto entitled "Witness against War" in the 15 October 1939 issue of the *Observer*.⁸⁵ (A month later, the *Observer* published an additional sixty-four names of both clergy and laypersons.⁸⁶) The manifesto was a public statement of the pacifist ministers' opposition to supporting the war effort, and it created a "firestorm of controversy."⁸⁷ Editorials in *The Star*, *The Globe and Mail* and *The Telegram* condemned the manifesto and others called for "strong action by the church and other authorities to condemn those who had signed it."⁸⁸ Even the Attorney-General Gordon Conant looked into whether or not it violated Regulations 39 or 39A of the War Measures Act.

Based on pre-war commentary, and especially formal church statements, the actions of the signatories should not have been a surprise.⁸⁹ A flurry of letters to the editor in the *Observer* in the months before the war indicate that many within the UCC were unwilling to support a new war: out of thirty two letters between March and October (1939), eleven supported the notion of a just war, whereas seventeen (plus twenty two co-signers) were supportive of a (absolute) pacifist position (four letters could be read either way).⁹⁰ Commentary in the pages of the *Observer* also made it clear that the pacifist impulse, though challenged, had not been eclipsed by the threat of war, even in the fearful late-1930s.⁹¹ While the volume of pacifist statements raises questions as to whether or not radical voices were really merely a "marginal voice in the church,"⁹² what is beyond dispute is that the pacifism expressed in the opening months of the war was simply a continuation of that trajectory, and what those in opposition to the war drew most heavily upon were the official statements of the UCC that had made it clear – at least to them – that the UCC had formally renounced war. The dissenting group within the UCC was convinced that it was being faithful to the church's teaching, and for support referred back to the four resolutions made by the UCC in 1932,⁹³ 1934,⁹⁴ 1936,⁹⁵ and 1938.⁹⁶ Those official statements increasingly became tilted to the pacifist cause, eventually endorsing conscientious objection and declaring outright a rejection of war: "That as Christians we positively reject war, because war rejects love, defies the will of Christ, and denies the worth of man. We must be prepared to follow Christ in turning from war because it is false and futile and destructive of human personality and spiritual values."⁹⁷ In 1938, it was further declared that, "war is contrary to the mind of Christ." The wording of such declarations, and voting support to approve the formal statements, reveals not only the extent of pacifist aspirations within UCC, but

also a willingness to formalize such views to be the position of the church on such matters. However, as an amendment to the 1938 statement indicates, there were still those who saw the state as having a role to play in the suppression of evil, and, despite a longing for peace, “in the present unredeemed state of the world the state has a duty under God to use force when Law and order are threatened or to vindicate an essential Christian principle, i.e., to defend victims of wanton aggression or secure freedom for the oppressed.” As will be noted below, that amendment contributed to confusion and division the following year.

The end result of such a range of opinion was that the UCC was seriously divided during a time of national crisis. It was certainly embarrassing for some within the UCC that a denomination with aspirations of leading the charge in regard to nation-building was so divided on a pressing issue of national security. Yet for others within the UCC, the disappointment was that the highly touted UCC had become an apostate church. R. Edis Fairbairn, prominent pacifist UCC minister and main instigator behind the “Witness against War,” claimed the church’s stance was a “deliberate profession of apostasy.”⁹⁸ While not all pacifists would have concurred with Fairbairn’s harsh rhetoric, many did lament that the arrival of war had snuffed out the hopes and dreams expressed in the anti-war statements of the church.

Postwar (absolutist) pacifism found fertile soil in the UCC due to an amalgam of diverse ideas, traditions, and assumptions within the UCC that created an identity marked by theological innovation. First, a pacifism that rejected or was reticent to support the just war tradition had some history within Methodism.⁹⁹ Methodist enlistment during the First World War was proportionately lower than Anglicans and Presbyterians. The UCC inherited that reluctance, and it is no coincidence that Fairbairn was formerly a Methodist minister.¹⁰⁰ In fact, of the sixty-eight signatories of the October “Witness Against War,” twenty-two (maybe twenty-four) were formerly Methodist ministers and only five (maybe six) were formerly PCC ministers.¹⁰¹ Those statistics confirm a significant Methodist connection to the UCC embracing of (absolute) pacifism and the rise of wartime dissent.¹⁰²

Second, the significant influence of the social gospel within the UCC also played a role in the widespread embracing of the antiwar movement. This is not to say the social gospel did not influence the PCC’s views on war and peace, for based on the nature of PCC discourse it very well seems to have been a factor. This is also not to say that one had to be a supporter of the social gospel to be a pacifist, for pacifism was rooted in many factors, religious and

secular, the social gospel being merely one factor among many. But that said, it was an important one in the 1920s and 1930s. Canadian Methodism had widely embraced the social gospel movement, bringing a penchant for pacifism into the union of 1925. Of course, Methodism was not monochrome. It had a mix of conservative and liberal forces, and the Great War had “deeply divided Methodism” even further.¹⁰³ Those tensions were never resolved leading into union. Some of those streams within Methodism, inherited by the UCC, lent themselves to the surging pacifism of the day. Along with PCC ministers who were enthused with the social gospel who joined the UCC, the new denomination was fertile soil indeed for embracing the surging antiwar sentiment of the postwar years. The influence of the social gospel (whether radical or conservative) can be seen in the nature of antiwar discourse, with readers fed a diet of articles referencing the “brotherhood of man” and a socialist critique of the causes of war.¹⁰⁴

Third, as with the PCC, denominational identity played a role in the development of pacifism within the UCC. Whereas issues related to identity contributed to the PCC being unwilling to evolve in new directions, the relative newness of the UCC meant that the future was open, and the identity of the church was fluid. The UCC church was born with a grand social vision, one which included Christianizing international relations, and the intersection of the rise of antiwar sentiment and the shaping of UCC identity provided what seemed to be an ideal opportunity for antiwar aspirations to make it onto the floor of General Assembly and into the church’s official statements. The lack of a statement in the UCC’s Basis of Union on the state’s use of the sword meant that there were no set limitations on new and bold ideas on that issue. In the minds of supporters of the peace statements, the UCC had become a prophetic voice in the face of rising militarism and rearmament.

The problem, however, was that the official statements of the church on war and peace not only reflected the rise of (absolute) pacifism within the ranks of the UCC, and fueled the optimism of those seeking to shape a church in their (pacifist) image, but were also a primary reason for the division in the opening months of the war. Quite simply, “both sides claimed with good reason” that they had the statements on their side.¹⁰⁵ The 1936 statement made it clear that the church “renounce[ed] war as an instrument of national policy.” By 1938, the church had begun to back-peddle, noting that war may be necessary “in the present unredeemed state of the world.” That was, it seems, a time when “realism nudged idealism aside,”¹⁰⁶ a part of a larger trend of alarmed people abandoning their position to respond to the looming crisis. The

result was hopes dashed and a church divided. However, all was not in vain, for, as in the PCC, the rise of pacifist criticism led to a tempered just war position, one that sought to avoid the excesses of the previous war.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

The range, fluidity, and diversity of UCC and PCC responses to war and peace during the interwar period reflects the optimism and pessimism of the age, as well as important differences in denominational trajectories and traditions. The UCC and PCC shared similar impulses for peace, as well as an internationalist vision for the role of the church in developing conditions conducive for peace, but there were also important differences. Interwar pacifism had broad appeal because it was a widely diverse movement, with (absolute) pacifists unwilling to support any war for any reason sharing the euphoria of outlawing war with (internationalist) pacifists willing to do all they could to end war – but not willing to renounce war as a last resort. Their rhetoric and methods shared much in common, and thus initially both had wide appeal, but, as war with Nazi Germany loomed, the differences among pacifists became more apparent with every German annexation. Support for (internationalist) pacifism was evident in both the PCC and UCC, but (absolute) pacifism only found fertile soil in the UCC. An amalgam of diverse ideas, traditions, and assumptions within the UCC created an identity marked by innovation that directly contributed to support for (absolute) pacifism, while church union in 1925 made for a conservative PCC, unwilling to adjust or abandon its core Presbyterian identity associated with the just war tradition. The end result was two very different responses to pacifism.

Endnotes

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2. Richard Overy, *The Inter-War Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2017).
3. In 1925, Canadian Methodism joined with Congregationalists and 2/3 of Presbyterians to form the United Church of Canada. The third of Presbyterians continued on their own, much reduced in size and resources.

4. For a study of Canadian Baptists and interwar views of war, see Gordon L. Heath, "'We Are Through with War': The Rise and Fall of Pacifism among Canadian Baptists Between the Two World Wars," *Baptistic Theologies* 9, 2 (2017): 37-53. Brief portions of this essay draw on the text of that article.
5. There are considerably fewer sources post-union of 1925, since the weekly *Presbyterian Witness* was shuttered and the *Presbyterian Record* remained as only a monthly paper. While the weekly *Christian Guardian* also stopped production with the union of 1925, its replacement, the *New Outlook*, was a weekly paper with extensive political commentary. The *New Outlook* was renamed the *Observer* in 1939.
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9. Gordon L. Heath, "The South African War as Prelude to the First World War," in *Canadian Churches and the First World War*, ed. Gordon L. Heath (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014), 15-33.
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14. "The Dawn of Peace," *Presbyterian Record*, December 1918; "Peace at Last," *Presbyterian Witness*, 5 July 1919; "Belittling the Peace Treaty," *Christian Guardian*, 25 February 1920; Edward Trelawney, "Canada's Share in Victory," *Christian Guardian*, 25 February 1920; "Armistice Day," *Christian Guardian*, 2 November 1921. See also, "Armistice Day," *Christian Guardian*, 23 November 1921; "Armistice Day," *Christian Guardian*, 19 November 1919; John Kelman, "The Vimy Pilgrimage," *Presbyterian Record*, October 1936; "Lest We Forget," *Presbyterian Record*, May 1936; "Vimy," *Presbyterian Record*, September 1936; "The Reason for Passchendaele," *Christian Guardian*, 10 March 1920.
15. For instance, "The World's Unrest," *Presbyterian Witness*, 5 January 1922 and "Brightening World Outlook," *Presbyterian Witness*, 5 January 1922 were published in the same issue.
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17. "Testing Times," *Presbyterian Witness*, 28 June 1919. For other examples, see "The War after the War," *Presbyterian Witness*, 1 February 1919; W. W. Cotton, "Our Leadership in the Post-Bellum World," *Christian Guardian*, 13 August 1919; "The New Year?" *Presbyterian Record*, January 1923; "Preparing for Future Wars," *Presbyterian Witness*, 12 July 1923; "The Winter of Our Discontent," *Christian Guardian*, 10 November 1920; "The Threat of War," *Christian Guardian*, 31 October 1922; "Europe Is Arming for the Next War," *Presbyterian Witness*, 9 August 1923; Hilda Boyd Collins, "Is the Modern World Hopeless?" *Christian Guardian*, 27 June 1923.
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63. "Stopping War," *Presbyterian Record*, January, November 1924.
64. "Presbyterian Pacifists Attention," *Presbyterian Record*, November 1934. Emphasis added.
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66. Canadian Baptists also published a number. See Gordon L. Heath, “‘We Are Through with War’: The Rise and Fall of Pacifism among Canadian Baptists Between the Two World Wars,” *Baptistic Theologies* 9, 2 (2017): 37-53.
67. John Service, “League of Nations,” *Presbyterian Record*, November 1932. Emphasis in original.
68. The 1934 minutes contain the first reference to the overture. See *Minutes of the Twenty-Ninth Synod of Saskatchewan of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (1934).
69. *Acts and Proceedings, Presbyterian Church in Canada* (1935), 51.
70. The 1930s saw an abandonment of liberal optimism, and its corollary pacifism. One of the most famous figures who migrated to a “Christian realism” was Reinhold Niebuhr.
71. “The Church’s Greater Task,” *Presbyterian Record*, November 1939; “The Church and War,” *Presbyterian Record*, November 1939; “A Just Peace,” *Presbyterian Record*, November 1939; *Acts and Proceedings, Presbyterian Church in Canada* (1936), 103.
72. John Moir makes a link between the social gospel and pro-church union party in the PCC. If he is right, the departure of the majority of PCC social gospellers into the UCC would have weakened the pacifist influence on views of war and peace in the PCC – and strengthened it in the UCC. See John Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Hamilton: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1974), 214.
73. John Moir describes the period as a time of “survival and reconstruction.” See Moir, *Enduring Witness*, ch. 11.
74. For an analysis of the composition of those who remained in the PCC, see Allan L. Farris, “The Fathers of 1925,” *Enkindled by the Word: Essays on Presbyterianism in Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1966), 59-82; and Ian S. Rennie, “Conservatism in the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1925 and Beyond: An Introductory Explanation,” *Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Papers*, 1982.
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76. John Moir notes how Presbyterians were, at times, “trapped by [their] own enduring witness to the traditions of Calvin, Knox, [and others].” See Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 215.

77. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, 373.
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81. *Acts and Proceedings, Presbyterian Church in Canada* (1940), 41. See also Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 241-5.
82. W. Edward Orser, "World War Two and the Pacifist Controversy in the Major Protestant Churches," in *Protestantism and Social Christianity*, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: K.G. Saur, 1992).
83. David R. Rothwell, "United Church Pacifism, October 1939," *Bulletin XXII* (1973-1975), 36-55; and Gordon L. Heath, "Irreconcilable Differences: Wartime Attitudes of George C. Pidgeon and R. Edis Fairbairn, 1939-1945," *Canadian Society of Church History Papers*, 1999.
84. Rothwell, "United Church Pacifism," 37.
85. "Witness Against War," *Observer*, 15 October 1939.
86. "Witness Against War," *Observer*, 15 November 1939.
87. Ian McKay Manson, "The United Church and the Second World War," in *A History of the United Church of Canada*, ed. Don Schweitzer (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 61.
88. Rothwell, "United Church Pacifism," 37, 47-50.
89. The earlier "Peace Pledge" that received over 2,000 signatures should also have been a warning to the church that that universal support for the traditional just war position could no longer be assumed. See David R. Rothwell, "United Church Pacifism, October 1939," *Bulletin 27* (1973-1975): 43-4.
90. See the "What Our Readers Say" section of the *Observer* from March to October, 1939.
91. "Is Christianity Pacifism?" *New Outlook*, 4 March 1936; George Lansbury, "Towards World Peace," *New Outlook*, 5 March 1937; Howard H. Eaton and C. Clare Oke, "No Compromise!" *New Outlook*, 6 May 1938; "Christians

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- Opposed to War Declares Board," *Observer*, 15 April 1939.
92. Eleanor Stebner, "The 1930s," In *A History of the United Church of Canada*, 51.
 93. *UCC Yearbook* (1932), 61, 105-6.
 94. *UCC Yearbook* (1934), 63-4.
 95. *UCC Record of Proceedings* (1936), 54, 107.
 96. *UCC Record of Proceedings* (1938), 63, 77-9, 93-8.
 97. *UCC Record of Proceedings* (1936), 107.
 98. Fairbairn, *Bulletin #1*, 1 January 1943. Fairbairn's discontent with the church led him to start and circulate the *Bulletin* that continued to criticize the just war position in general, and the UCC support for it in particular. Copies can be seen at the United Church Archives, Toronto.
 99. A.J. Belton, "Letter to Editor," *Observer*, 15 March 1939.
 100. Fairbairn was a key leader of Methodist pacifism in the 1920s. See Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 98. The third denomination that entered into church union in 1925 was Congregationalism, a movement not associated with pacifism.
 101. A number of signers were ordained after 1925: six in the 1920s, twenty-two in the 1930s, and two in the 1940s. I could not be certain of the identity of ten others. See *Walkington Guide, A Listing of United Church Canada Ministers, 1925-1980*. United Church Archives, Toronto. The former Methodist minister B.L. Oaten was on the list, but he did not agree to it being included. See Rothwell, "United Church Pacifism," 40.
 102. An analysis of the signatories of the November "Witness Against War" reveals the following. Of thirty identified as ordained clergy, five were formerly Methodist, four formerly Presbyterian, one uncertain, and twenty ordained after church union. Of the thirty-three identified as non-clergy, twenty were male, twelve were female, with the identity of one uncertain. See *Walkington Guide, A Listing of United Church Canada Ministers, 1925-1980*. United Church Archives, Toronto. The number of laity and of women is noteworthy and suggests further avenues for research.
 103. Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 408.

104. R.C. Chalmers, "Wanted: A Peace Ideology," *New Outlook*, 2 December 1938.
105. Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation*, 128.
106. Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation*, 128.
107. "The Church and War," *Observer*, 1 September 1939.

