

CANADIAN PENTECOSTAL NARRATIVES: STORIES OF CALLING, RITUALS, AND APOLOGETICS

LINDA M. AMBROSE
MARTIN W. MITTELSTADT

Pentecostals are great storytellers. We believe in the transformational nature of story. Stories, what Pentecostals typically described as “testimonies,” afford the opportunity to attest to accounts of conversion, calling, healing, and Spirit baptism. These stories are generally shared either orally (as in a church gathering), or in print. In fact, early Pentecostal literature has been marked by a commitment to publication of stories possibly unparalleled by any other tradition. As Canadian Pentecostal scholarship continues to evolve, analysis of these early publications continues to be central to this work. The relationship between story and history – hi(story) – becomes increasingly important as we seek to better understand Pentecostal roots, identity, and press to the future prospects. In this issue, we present the work of scholars who use narratives to probe the Canadian Pentecostal story more deeply.

Retrieving the stories of early Pentecostals is fascinating work. The single-minded devotion to the call of God that those believers exhibited makes their stories inspirational. For historians, few experiences can match the thrill of chasing down the details and piecing together the narratives of an early Canadian Pentecostal “hero.” Caleb Courtney provides our first example as he demonstrates the patient and meticulous work required to recreate the story of Barbara Johnston, an early Canadian Pentecostal missionary to India. Courtney combs the archival record like a detective, and in so doing, he offers an important contribution on the rise of Pentecostalism in Sarnia, Ontario. Even as we were preparing to publish this issue, he discovered new details and added them to his essay. Courtney tells a new and important story that helps counter the popular yet often anecdotal belief that Pentecostals first stumble into the movement from the margins of society. To the contrary, Johnston, not unlike many of her contemporaries, was a university-educated woman. Moreover, she did not follow God’s call simply to perform the traditionally prescribed gender roles of wife and mother, but rather to

translate texts for the mission field using her Greek language training. She also planned and executed a demanding itinerary for herself and for her husband, where she preached and taught as a skilled speaker.

Bruce Shelvey pieces together a heartwarming story of pastoral devotion and faithfulness. Like Courtney, Shelvey brings personal passion to this essay, which in many ways is a tribute to his parents. Ernest and Bertha Shelvey exemplify consummate Canadian Prairie ministers; they served nearly twenty congregations in Manitoba and Saskatchewan over a period of some sixty years. Bruce Shelvey goes beyond offering an outline of his parents' journey to reflect on the nature of his parents' calling, and presents his father as a restless sojourner and a pioneer eager to follow the leading of the Spirit even if against the dictates of organized religion. Bruce Shelvey finds a template in the work of philosopher Richard Kearney, and produces a helpful guide for future researchers to better understand the movements and motives of early Canadian Pentecostals. I [Marty Mittelstadt] am particularly grateful for Bruce's contribution because in 1984, when I was a young college student from Winnipeg with aspirations for pastoral ministry, I completed an internship in Gilbert Plains, MB under the supervision of "Ernie" Shelvey. This past spring, when I was in Langley with Bruce Shelvey, and he began to talk of his father's treasure chest of sermons and writings, I encouraged him to craft his parents' story for publication. The individual narrative accounts that Shelvey and Courtney offer in this issue will prompt other researchers, not only to retrieve and give voice to the early contributors to Canadian Pentecostalism, but also to analyze how those experiences add to the complexity of the larger story, particularly on questions of region, gender, and institutional versus individual authority.

Natasha Wiebe offers another form of storytelling, an approach that she calls "narrative inquiry." As the term suggests, she not only tells a story, but does so in an interrogating manner, in keeping with auto-ethnographic practice. Wiebe writes invoking vignettes from her own youth based upon family ties to both Mennonite and Pentecostal traditions. She adopts a playful tone to explore the rituals and practices that came to shape her identity as a "mennocostal." She serves up a melange of "Pentecostal exuberance and Mennonite quiet," of "Pentecostal soldiers [Crusaders] and Mennonite peacemakers;" and of

two traditions identified as being “in the world, but not of the world.” Canadian readers might compare Wiebe’s somewhat jaded but sympathetic Pentecostal story to the Mennonite backgrounds employed in the fictive works of Canadian authors such as Miriam Toews and David Bergen. What we find particularly compelling about Wiebe’s paper is her assertion that “the stories we tell about experiences in Pentecostal and Mennonite communities may express and perpetuate official storylines, but also push back against their constraints.” This claim will surely resonate with readers whose own vignettes about identity formation mirror those of Wiebe, whether through youthful episodes of conformity to church subculture or a pronounced emphasis on nonconformity to mainstream culture.

We turn next to mainstream culture to consider narratives of personal faith not expressed with written text, but produced for the big screen. How might evangelical or charismatic Christians present their stories to the general public? In a thoughtful analysis of two recent films produced by the “God’s Not Dead” franchise, Blaine Charette takes up the question of cultural engagement and explores the apologetics behind this evangelical response to the so-called “culture wars.” The films address the loss of influence and power by American evangelicals in recent decades. Charette sets out to critique the assumptions embedded in the films, and offers an alternative way forward. He suggests that believers who wish to engage in cultural analysis and dialogue would be well served to remember that “the Bible offers profound insight on how narratives can function in a truly prophetic way.” We publish this piece by a fellow Canadian, who lives in the United States, because we are convinced that his insights into American evangelicalism will foster reflection and discussion among Canadians. For example, how might evangelical and charismatic believers north of the border take up questions of cultural engagement alongside or against our southern neighbours?

Finally, since Canadians and Americans make good neighbours, we are not surprised that for many early Canadian Pentecostals, the border between the two countries was highly permeable. In order to retrieve our Canadian stories, any seasoned or up-and-coming scholar of Canadian Pentecostalism will be awed of the world’s largest Pentecostal archive located in the heartland of America. As we continue our series on “Notes from the Archives,” we

are pleased to feature the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Centre in Springfield, Missouri as an important repository for researchers of Canadian Pentecostalism. Darrin J. Rodgers describes how this well-endowed facility proves invaluable not only to potential on-site researchers willing and able to make a trip to the Midwest, but also to online researchers by way of vast digitized collections. Rodgers suggests several lines of inquiry that Canadian scholars might usefully pursue, and at the same time, he demonstrates how the accessible systems and helpful staff at the FPHC can help to unlock narratives of Canadian Pentecostalism carefully preserved and ready for curious researchers to discover them.

Scholarship on Pentecostalism continues to expand and we know that readers will enjoy the selection of book reviews on offer in this issue. Adam Stewart, our book review editor, recruited colleagues who represent both established and emerging scholars to review some of the latest publications that represent the rich interdisciplinary nature of Pentecostal studies. And remember, it's not too late to add these titles to your Christmas wish list for your holiday reading!

We hope you enjoy this issue. We encourage you to register with us at <https://journal.twu.ca/index.php/index/index> and follow our updates – and so much more – on the *Canadian Pentecostal Research Network* on Facebook.