

May 26, 2018
(April Letter)

Dear Samantha,

Now for your second question about the United Church. I would have thought that you know more about this than I, since you have attended a number of conferences and activities, whereas I haven't been involved for many years. Nevertheless, I'll give you my impressions anyway.

The UC has been going through some interesting changes over its whole history. I consider this a healthy thing. If you check out some of our own family history you will find that your great-great-grandfather (James M.) and great-grandfather (Jack – or Michael John Victor) were part of those changes, and even my own period in the church during my SCM days was a part of more recent changes. I figure that during your own time in the UC you have been part of the most recent changes.

Since I don't know much about the most recent changes, I thought I would give you a very brief account of the changes above along with some of the relevant materials that you might find interesting – before providing my impressions of the current situation.

Your great-great-grandfather (James M. Shaver) was a Methodist minister around the time that the United Church was organized from the Methodist, Congregational, and some Presbyterian churches (1925). As you know from our visit to the All People's Mission in Winnipeg, he felt very strongly that an important focus for the UC in Canada was to help new immigrants get integrated into Canadian Society in ways where they would not be victims to unscrupulous employers. The keys, he felt, lay in teaching them English, informing them of their social rights, and making sure they gained skills that would help them get employed. He also felt that sports and group activities (like camps) was a great way to facilitate this. Thus, he organized classes, workshops, and camps to reach these goals.



I have included a few photos from his "Black Album" that were taken in various missions and activities in which he was engaged. One is of the first English class he taught and the second is from a leadership camp in which he was involved later (in Gimly Manitoba). On the next page I have also included one of the Midget baseball champs. It is an illustration of the way in which he felt sports were important. He was also very involved in building various summer camps so I have included one which gives you an idea what they looked like. They are very different than most of the summer camp setups in which you have been involved, I expect.



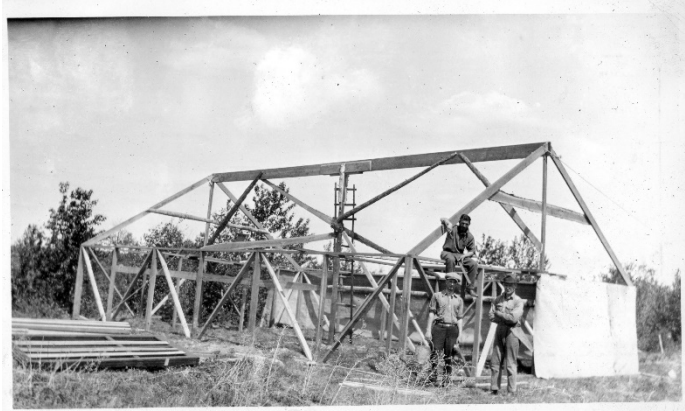
This was during a time when the political climate in Manitoba (and several other places in Canada) was strongly influenced by socialist ideas from Europe. This included an emphasis on collective action and reduction in private ownership of social organizations. They argued (among other things) that

governments should not turn over their responsibilities to the private sector, but build education, health, transportation, energy, and similar sectors as public institutions. They also supported efforts to get fair wages. This was the time when Tommy Douglas (another Minister) was active and arguing for public universal medicare.



It was a time of change in the church – not only because they were merging with other religious groups, but because it raised the question of the objectives of the church and its involvement in political and social action. For your great-great-grandfather, this was manifested in his work in Winnipeg – and conflicts that emerged with the church leaders in Toronto. The Toronto leaders felt that he was spending too much time with people who would unlikely become members of the UC (Jews, Greek Orthodox, Catholics) in his effort to support recent immigrants. James M. felt that membership was not an issue in the church's mission. We are lucky that an MA student at the University of Winnipeg produced a thesis on this topic since it provides some useful detail about the general changes as well as about James M.'s life. You can access the thesis via <http://billreimer.net/workshop/Shaver/Documents/PaymentJamesMShaverThesis2000MQ51783.pdf>.

There is also a nice (short) piece about James M. in the Touchstone journal. The link is http://billreimer.ca/Shaver/Documents/TouchstoneShaverArticleVol7No2_1989.pdf. I also like to look at the photos that James M. took during the time of his work in Winnipeg. It gives a good idea of the circumstances, people, and activities that occupied him during that time. You can find the photos on the USB key I prepared for the family. Most of them are in the JamesShaverBlackAlbum sub-folder in the ShaverHistory folder.



Your great-great-grandfather was part of the change in the UC as it was trying to work out its social role and responsibility. Your great-grandfather (Jack) picked up that theme, but took it in a more theological direction as he started his own career in Winnipeg – and later at UBC as the first United Church Chaplain in Canada. He was influenced by the Oxford Group in England, and became focused on issues around personal salvation and reconciliation rather than social and political action. The social action issue was always on his mind, but his involvement with a small group of theological thinkers in Winnipeg took him to issues that were part of new changes in the UC. This was a period of time when people began questioning the nature of God and the implications for their own meaning.

When Jack went to UBC, he became very involved with these questions since it was a context where many students were raising such questions in their own lives. His reading and thinking developed these ideas not only for the campus situation, but he became a spokesperson for the broader church as they faced the challenges of declining membership, social rejection, and their own spiritual questioning.

These were the days of existentialism, the “death of God” claims, street marches against the Vietnam war, and questions about the need of the UC.

Jack became an important interpreter for the church during that period. His messages that “self-justification is a bust”, that God is interested in saving His people, not rewarding the good or punishing the bad, and that righteousness can do more harm than evil, seemed to resonate with many in the UC. A good illustration of that is to look at the Jack Word Book – put together by a group of his friends (<http://billreimer.ca/Shaver/Documents/JACKWORDBOOK.PDF>). Another short description of his contributions can be found in the journal article written by his friend, June Lythgoe (http://billreimer.ca/Shaver/Documents/TouchstoneShaverArticleVol21No1_2003.pdf).

It was also the time that Fran and I became involved in the SCM at UBC. This was a national student group that was heavily into social and political action (against the war in Vietnam, ban the bomb, black segregation) and increasingly attractive to students who were questioning issues about identity and meaning. Fran and I joined the summer work camps of the SCM for a couple of years and I was the President of the UBC group – which also meant that I attended the SCM national conferences for a number of years.

The issues of the day included the development of positions on political and social events, but also about the more personal issues of identity, sexual morality, and inter-personal relations. It’s easy to forget that the UC approaches to sexuality, for example, underwent a significant change from the 1960s to the current period. In the early days it was about whether sex outside of marriage, masturbation, or even discussing sexual issues were acceptable! Same-sex marriage, LGBTQ issues, and the ordaining of women were not even on the agenda since they were seen as much too radical.

My impression is that the current issues of the UC are a reflection of these past changes and some relatively new ones that have emerged as the meaning of religion, new technologies like the internet, and the aging of the population have changed. Here are some of my guesses about the key ones.

- The declining membership since the 1960s has been an issue during all this time Combined with the changing constituents of the UC (e.g. immigrants and disillusioned people from other churches) this has created a crisis in its self-understanding and fiscal management.
- Atheists have always been welcomed and part of the UC (certainly since our SCM days), but the public declaration of a UC Minister that she is an atheist (Gretta Vosper) has made the issue an administrative crisis (<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2016/09/08/defrock-atheist-minister-gretta-vosper-united-church-panel-urges.html>). I’m pleased to hear that her congregation has supported her. It will be interesting to see how this eventually gets resolved in the future.
- The long-term connection of the UC with Indigenous Peoples will mean that the issue of reconciliation will continue to put pressure on the church. In general, the UC has a relatively good relationship with Indigenous Peoples but it will still take a lot of work to figure out what reconciliation means and how it will change the relationships and institutions involved.
- The UC has continued its historical support of immigrants to Canada, but there are some new challenges associated with the current patterns that make it special. One is the extent to which many of these immigrants are more fundamentalist. I noticed this in the groups of people from south-east Asia (Philippines, etc.) for example. It will be interesting to see if they pressure the UC in more fundamentalist ways or whether the more liberal views that have developed in the UC become attractive to new immigrants.
- The UC is also involved in support for non-Christian immigrants. This raises some of the old issues that James M. Shaver stirred up in his era. I wonder how the UC will manage this issue.

Will it insist on conversion levels being high or will it take a stand closer to your great-great-grandfather?

I'm not sure if this responds to your question, but if not, you can always ask some more. I find it interesting that you not only are interested in the activities of the church but have chosen a path for your education and possibly career that parallels your heritage (and I haven't even mentioned Fran's involvement in all this!).

Love,

Here's a photo of your Great-Grandfather Jack and his brother Bill. Jack is on the right hand side.

