

April 29, 2017
(March Letter)

Dear Samantha,

Fran received a package from Mark Chochla – a “shirttail cousin” – a few weeks ago that got me noticing some charming similarities among five generations of Shavers that seem to be appearing in your own career and life choices. I thought you might be interested in this legacy of which you are a part.

Mark’s package included an article he wrote entitled “What Was James M. Shaver Doing in the Coal Docks?”. It is in a journal named “Papers and Records, Volume XLIV (2016)”. The paper is a brief description of the activities of your great-great-grandfather, James M. Shaver, when he was in Fort William (now Thunder Bay) from 1912 to 1921. During that period he was hired as a “missionary” by the Wesley Institute of Fort William that was established by the young people of Wesley Methodist Church. This was before the Methodist, Congregational, and most Presbyterian churches became united as the United Church of Canada. (See: <http://billreimer.ca/Shaver/Documents/ChochlaWhatWasJamesMShaverPapersAndRecords2016PP42-75.pdf>).

The Wesley Institute was established in the “coal docks” of Fort William to help the many immigrants who had settled there among difficult conditions. There was a great deal of labour unrest in the area and the immigrants were often hired as “scab” labour by the companies to try and break the strikes that were a feature of that unrest.

Chochla writes in his article that “James Shaver saw the economic system as unfair and undemocratic. In its grip was one million foreigners who had recently escaped ‘penury and serfdom’ in Europe only to find that in Canada they were still in its grasp” (p. 46). James felt that by teaching these immigrants to speak and read English and to inform them about British democratic rights they would be able to not only resist the injustice of their conditions, but improve their living conditions, and become more capable Canadian citizens. He organized classes at the Wesley Institute’s “Wayside House”, collaborated with the unions to encourage democratic understandings, and sought numerous other ways to develop collaborative community action. His approach was comprehensive – involving a wide range of community groups and actors with a vision that was more than a specific religious or ethnic group.

The circumstances make me think about the current situation with Syrian and other refugees who are struggling with war, injustice, and resettlement. I’m pleased that some are finding support in Canada.

However, there were many other church leaders who felt that James was insufficiently focused on the conversion of the newcomers to Christianity in general and the Methodist (and later United) Church in particular. His willingness to work with the Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches, and to welcome many Jewish residents was seen as an unacceptable approach by some. James did not want to establish a church, but to build an institution that would create social change.

I also discovered that Shirley Payment, a student at the University of Winnipeg, wrote a Master’s Thesis in 1999 about James. In it, she gives plenty of detail about the nature of James’ conflict with the church leaders (mostly in Toronto), the stress it created for him, and the impacts it had on the communities in which he worked. Payment’s research focused more on James’ Winnipeg days at the Stella Mission, but the issues which emerged at the Wesley Institute were very similar. They were rooted in the perspectives of the “Social Gospel”: a movement which argued that Christians should be working to create a better world now rather than looking to save souls for the future. (See: <http://billreimer.ca/Shaver/Documents/PaymentJamesMShaverThesis2000MQ51783.pdf>)

If you check out much of your great-grandfather's (James' son Jack) writings and presentations, you will see the same themes emerging (See: <http://billreimer.ca/Shaver/ShaverHM.htm>). Jack was raised during the Stella Mission days that you will know about from our visit to Winnipeg. You will see from our family photos how he was a regular participant in the activities of the mission – most clearly shown in the summer camps they built and organized. When I met Jack at UBC during the 1960s and 70s, I found his contributions particularly interesting since he interpreted Christianity as a call for social action rather than a demand for converts. Instead of focusing on abstract theology and debates, he encouraged us to consider what they mean for those who were marginalized, sick, poor, or otherwise disadvantaged.

This was reflected in his time as United Church Chaplain at UBC but was even more clear when he moved to work at First United Church in Vancouver's Downtown East Side. It was in this position that he focused on the many people suffering from drug abuse, mental illness, poverty, homelessness, and other forms of social exclusion. He interpreted the Christian doctrine of sin as a call to participate with others while they are "sinners" and not to demand that they renounce their "sin" – or even change. We tend not to use that language these days, but the sentiment of engaging with those who are different from us without demanding that they become more like us is still very relevant.

By the time that Jack moved to First United in 1969, your grandmother Fran had already introduced her own version of this Shaver legacy at the church. She was hired as a Community Worker from 1967 to 69 to provide support to those in the local community. The church leaders thought this would mean providing leadership for the local CGIT girls, supporting church events, and organizing activities within the church. Fran, on the other hand, turned outward to the community and sought ways in which the church might participate in the local community rather than assume people would come to the church. It was a similar sentiment to that expressed by her father and grandfather before her.

One of the most innovative of Fran's activities were her regular visits to the Vancouver City Jail. The jail was right across the street from the church. Every few days, she arranged with the local police to be put in the holding cell with whoever arrived. She would just visit with the people there. She didn't have anything to offer them except conversation – and she was not interested in converting them in any way. Instead, she felt that being with them was enough – listening, considering options, encouraging where possible, and generally letting them know that they were not alone. Once again, it was a Christianity of support rather than one of conversion. Years later, it became the basis for her academic and activist work relating to the sex industry (see: <http://francesmshaver.ca>).

When she was at Brock University, your mother informed us that she had enrolled in the "Dominican Republic Experience". This was a program where students would live with a family in that country and study the issues they faced. It seemed to me to be a continuation of the Shaver legacy. The program had been established by the Catholic Church but evolved beyond religion to focus on learning by doing and being present with other people as they managed the challenges in their lives.

Thus, it was little surprise to hear about your participation in First Met, the conference activities, and even the BC Conference. It seems to me to be part of this general family interest in learning about other people, supporting those who are less fortunate, and doing so by engaging with them as they are rather than demanding that they change. It also means going outside your "comfort zone" on behalf of others. Your choice of Recreation Administration seems to be a lovely continuation of this legacy.

I am very pleased to see the echoes of this Shaver "tradition" in your life and look forward to its evolution in this fifth generation.