

Social Grace at the Birth of the Toronto United Church Council

It was a year of hope, prosperity and rapid change. Canada was already 25 years old and technology was bringing innovations that had been unimaginable just a few years earlier. Everything, it seemed, was getting more and more modern.

That year, 1892, the first electric streetcar had appeared on the streets of Toronto. People began to whisper that the horse-drawn streetcars might eventually be replaced altogether.

That year, Lord Stanley of Preston, the Governor-General, was so impressed with the new game of hockey, that he bought a silver bowl lined with gold, dubbed it the Stanley Cup, and decreed that it be given each year to the best amateur hockey team in Canada.

The Toronto Star put out its first edition that year, settling into a format of four pages at one cent a copy.

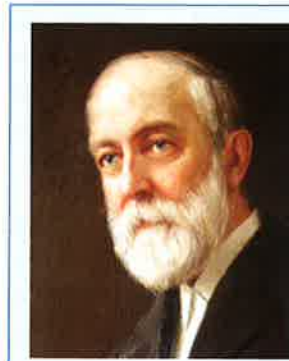
Political advances were happening bewilderingly fast. The splendid Ontario Legislative Assembly building at Queen's Park opened its doors that year; the first women in Toronto were elected to represent voters (on the Toronto Board of Education); the

country's top legislators put the final touches on the first version of Canada's Criminal Code.

Electric lights, flush toilets, telephones and even asphalted streets – in place of cedar-paved and dirt roads – were becoming more common. The cross-Canada railroad

had been open for seven years, making movement from sea to sea comfortable and easy. And in 1892, the 180,000 citizens of Toronto even had their choice of mail-order goods from the catalogues of two Canadian retail icons: Eaton's and Simpson's.

So it's no wonder that 1892 seemed like a good year to launch the Methodist Social Union of Toronto, the direct forebear of today's Toronto United Church Council. The city's wealthy Methodists, spurred by the Massey family, wanted to celebrate their church by making it stronger and more vibrant. In a nutshell, the Social Union was established "for the general advancement of the interests of our denomination in the city of Toronto," its archival papers say.



CHESTER MASSEY

But the Methodists wanted to have fun while they did it. Begun March 25, 1892, the Social Union was, in effect, a social club with a focus on holding banquets, giving receptions and hosting the famed Easter Monday fundraising concerts.

The "hour of glory" came on September 9, 1898 when the Social Union threw an elegant feast at Toronto's new Exhibition Grounds for the General Conference of the Methodist Church in Canada, according to the industrialist Chester Massey, who gave a speech at the event.

He and his father Hart Massey, of the internationally successful farm-implements company, were the purse and brains behind the Social Union.

As well as organizing glamorous events, the wealthy founders of the Social Union offered their financial acumen to Methodist congregations that were having trouble paying their bills. As part of that, they helped the church as a whole figure out financially savvy spots to put up new places of worship. They pressed



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VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

for financial accountability and freedom from crippling debt.

Informally, the Social Union became the Methodist Church's banker and real estate advisor in Toronto.

The Massey impulse that gave birth to the Social Union was also at work for citizens outside the Methodist denomination throughout these years and in later Canadian eras. The family supported education, music and the arts, in addition to helping the poor.

Massey money founded Victoria University within the University of

Toronto and its residence Burwash Hall, Massey Hall, Hart House for students at the University of Toronto and Massey College for its graduate students.

Later, Chester Massey's son Vincent became the first Canadian-born Governor-General. Vincent Massey's enthusiastic interest in Canada's arts and letters was one factor that led to the founding of the Canada Council, the National Library, the National Arts Centre, the National Gallery and the yearly Massey Lectures.

The Methodist Social Union of Toronto, now the Toronto United Church Council, is linked both philosophically and by direct heritage to all these beloved Canadian institutions.

The Mother of Invention

A Social Club Spawns a Social Agency

By 1910, the focus of the Social Union had changed. Its leaders had become aware of "the down town problem." Immigrants were flocking to the country in numbers unmatched in Canada's history, before or since. In the four years spanning 1910 to 1913, 1.4 million people immigrated to Canada, many to its most populous province, Ontario, and to that province's capital, Toronto.

Canada's social safety net was in its infancy and massively inadequate. Someone needed to take care of the poor.

The leaders of the Social Union took decisive action. They realized "the growing importance of the down town problem and the necessity for grappling with it before it assumes any greater magnitude," according to the Union's minute books of 1911.

The Union could no longer be only about advancing the interests of a single denomination. It was a new day. The social challenges were different and more complex. The Union had to develop new ways of thinking about itself and the Methodist Church. It needed to go beyond the congregation, beyond the denomina-

tion and take responsibility for the entire community.

The Union realized that “the care of the unchurched and churchless people down town calls for a form of organized Christian work entirely different from the ordinary Methodist Church.” It was a prophetic sentiment, and one that has come to represent the modern mission of the church.



CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES, SERIES 372, SUBSERIES 32, ITEM 677

Baby weighing at Fred Victor Mission, circa 1910

By 1912, the Social Union had formally joined with the Fred Victor Mission (another Massey enterprise, named after Chester Massey's son Fred Victor Massey, who had died young) and had taken charge of the social service work for the entire city of Toronto and its suburbs. That year, it made the change official by also changing its name to the Methodist Union.

By then, the banquets and concerts were just a memory. But the Union was still the Methodist Church's real estate advisor and financial whiz. It set up a new fund to provide interest-free loans to build new churches and help old ones. It maintained trust funds. It even embarked on a successful fundraising drive in 1914 to raise \$250,000, the equivalent of about \$4.5 million in today's money.

(It was the second time the Union had turned to the church's congregations to raise money, the first being a small campaign in 1904 to raise \$2,500 a year from the Sunday collection plate.)

The Union was determined, however, not to spend its money on what it called the “weak and dying”

churches, but to use its financial muscle where it could make a difference. The times called for it.

It was a prescient move. The following three decades were filled with struggle not only in Toronto, but also across Canada and through much of the world.

The First World War took a terrible toll, and so did the influenza pandemic of 1918. Then came the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the Second World War.

In the meantime, in 1925, the Methodist Church, the Congregationalist Church and two-thirds of the Presbyterian churches in Canada joined to form The United Church of Canada, now the biggest Protestant denomination in the country.

The first general council of the United Church took place in what had been the Metropolitan Wesleyan Methodist Church at 56 Queen Street East. It was also the birthplace of the Methodist Union and is known today as Metropolitan United Church.

The Methodist Union was renamed the Toronto Church Extension and Mission Union in 1926 to reflect its role in the new United Church. It retained the financial and social functions of its predecessor.

Then, in 1935, in the teeth of the Great Depression, the organization's name switched once more. This time, it became the Toronto Home Missions Council. Throughout this period and until after the Second World War, the organization's focus was on taking care of Toronto's poor, regardless of denomination. This phase of its existence was about being a leader in social justice and in the development of congregations eager to embrace the age's new social complexity.

A Social Agency Gives Birth to a Property Developer

Building Homes for Congregations

After the Second World War, the Toronto Home Missions Council again moved with astonishing resilience, changing with the tenor of the times. It was a period of stunning economic and population growth in Canada. The war was over. People were once again filled with hope.

It meant that Council needed to help build new churches and Christian education buildings, redevelop older churches, and launch congregations in the rapidly expanding suburbs of Toronto.

The Toronto Home Missions Council poured its creative energy into making this happen.

This involved trying to predict where new housing developments were going to end up. Sometimes it meant tromping through muddy fields and seeing the bustling cities to come, or poring over planning documents to see where the roads were going to be built. It was a complex real estate play. Then, as before and since, Council wanted to make sure that old and new congregations were not burdened with too much debt.

The Legacy of George H. Armstrong

Before his death in 1938, George H. Armstrong knew that his church was moving into a period of dramatic change; innumerable new congregations would be needed in his beloved Toronto, and the surrounding area. To the fulfillment of this dream, he left his entire estate. Some of the congregations begun with the support of the Armstrong Fund have completed their ministries, and others continue. The "Armstrong supported" list is impressive:



Forest Hill	Armour Heights	Wilson Heights	St. Andrew's (Markham)
Leaside	Lawrence Park	The Donway	Malvern Emmanuel
Cosburn	Victoria Park	Yorkminster	Heart Lake
Royal York Road	Alderwood	Rexdale	Northwest Barrie
Islington	Northlea	West Ellesmere	North Star (Brampton)
Lakeview	St. James (Etobicoke)	Hillcrest	
Riverside	Tretheway Park	Covenant	
Long Branch		londale Heights	

And that meant raising large amounts of money that the council could turn into mortgages for the new congregations. In 1950, Council launched a drive for \$500,000 (or about \$4.4 million in today's dollars). By 1957, it embarked on a far more ambitious campaign to raise \$2.5 million (or about \$18.5 million in today's terms).

By the time this phase of Council's life had wound down, in the late 1960s, Council had helped build 47 new churches, manses, several Christian Education buildings, church additions and church redevelopments. In all, Council worked on or built one third of the United Church buildings that existed in Metropolitan Toronto in 1967, according to a history of Council published in 1988.

The property developer evolves into a midwife for healthy congregations

Building congregational capacity

As the Baby Boom came to an end, so did the United Church's building boom. By the early 1970s, Council was again in the throes of change. Church membership was in decline among many denominations. Donations on Sunday mornings had declined in lockstep.

The church needed Council to perform a different function and renamed it the Toronto United Church Council in 1973 to reflect this shift.

As in the past, the focus was on resilience, decisiveness, accountability. The larger church was counting on Council to get things done, just as the Methodists had nearly a century earlier.

This time, though, the focus was on lending financial support and strategic planning to the congregations. When a church needed a new roof, it applied to Council for a grant or a loan. If it needed an additional wing, or if it wanted to reinvent its mission, Council was there to help make it happen, with both money and expertise.

The same applied to new congregations that might need a new piece of



In 2005 Metropolitan United Church in downtown Toronto opened its newly excavated basement. A challenging engineering feat, the retrofit added 11,000 square feet to the church and was financed with a \$1.5 million dollar loan from the Investing in Ministry Fund.

land or a new building. Or to any of the four children's summer camps for which Council owns the property. Council was the rightful heir to the financially savvy leaders who had set up the Methodist Union at the end of the 1800s. Both were established to make decisions swiftly and without long laments if they were the wrong ones.

As in the Massey era, though, the mission of Council goes beyond the interests of the congregation or the advancement of a single denomination. Along with managing assets and loans, the new Council also sets its sights on helping the church serve Canadian society at large.

In that, it takes the lead from the interests of the congregations. As of old, that often means taking care of the poor. But today, that might mean helping a congregation buy freezers to set up a community food bank. Or helping a congregation set up office space to develop social services or workplaces for the mentally challenged.

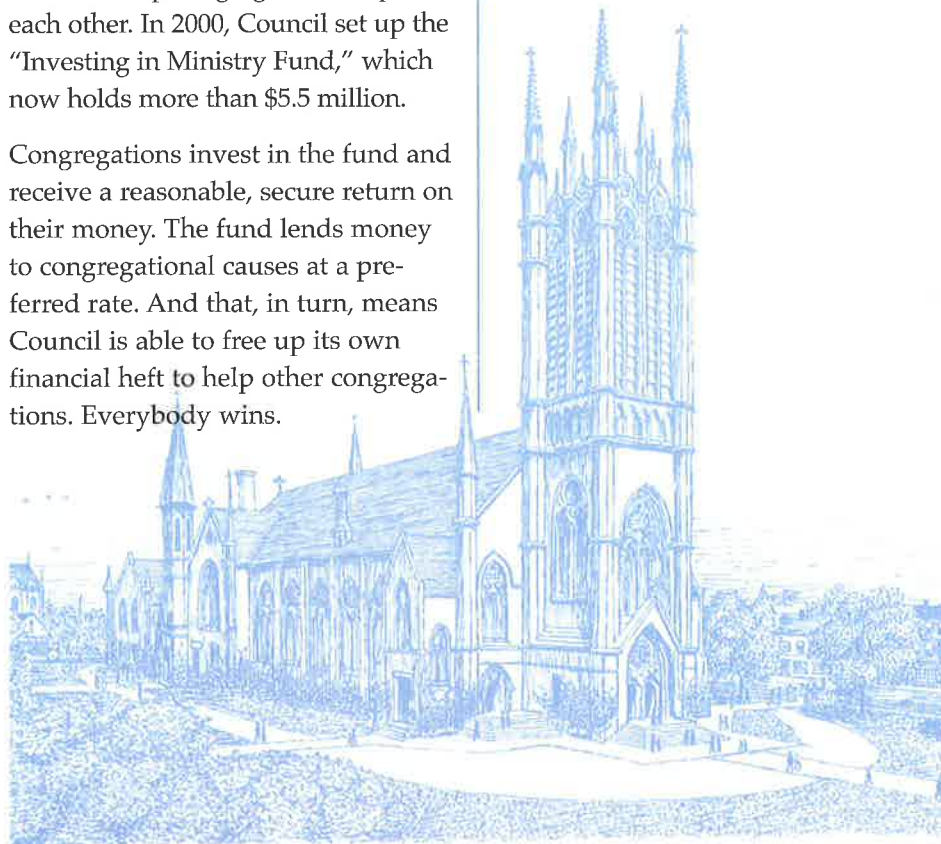
Today, that also means helping a congregation build a community centre for all citizens, or setting up a holistic health centre, or building environmentally-friendly housing for the homeless, or working with the United Church at large to care about the deteriorating life-support system of the planet, or helping the church

understand the AIDS pandemic in Africa.

Council is the child of its Methodist parents in many other ways as well, driven by both innovation and necessity. In recent years, it has begun developing novel financial instruments to help congregations help each other. In 2000, Council set up the "Investing in Ministry Fund," which now holds more than \$5.5 million.

Congregations invest in the fund and receive a reasonable, secure return on their money. The fund lends money to congregational causes at a preferred rate. And that, in turn, means Council is able to free up its own financial heft to help other congregations. Everybody wins.

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Metropolitan Wesleyan Methodist Church, Toronto, 1872 - J.C. Duff '70

Toronto United Church Council has big plans. With a nod to its ancestor organization's revelation that it needed to care for "the unchurched and churchless people," Council has broadened its perspective again. The church needs permission to dream. It has a duty to recreate itself, to get on with the business of transforming lives.

Council has pledged to help the church do this. How? By nimbly unearthing new ways to help the people of the United Church grow the capacity to minister to society's vulnerable, in whatever form that takes.

It's a complex task. Today, Council is responsible to more than 300 congregations and presbyteries covering much of south-central Ontario, from Muskoka to Lake Ontario. And these congregations are not the formulaic creatures of the 1950s. They run the gamut from decades old to brand-new, from thriving financially to struggling mightily, from knowing exactly what to do to being mired in despair.

They are urban, suburban and rural. Culturally diverse and not. Devoted to pipe-organ hymns and also exper-

imenting with guitar-chord gospels. Neighbourhood-based and regional.

To support these far-reaching efforts, Council has launched a \$20-million fundraising campaign called Seven Years of Plenty. It is the first fundraising push for Council in nearly 50 years, following the one begun in 1957, and it is the fifth in the organization's long history.