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Young Men and the Creation of Civic Christianity in Urban Methodist Churches, 1880-1914

Nancy Christie

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Article abstract

This article examines the formation and discourse of the Epworth League, established by the Methodist Church as a lay organization intended to keep adolescent boys in the church. While the Epworth League was ostensibly open to both men and women, its real aim was to masculinize a church which was perceived to be dominated by a female membership and female-led organizations. This article explores when and how this construction of youthful piety became embedded within Methodism and the impact it had on the shape of church governance. Moreover, it argues that social Christianity, which gained a foothold through the mechanism of the League was an essentially male-gendered discourse.

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NANCY CHRISTIE

Abstract

This article examines the formation and discourse of the Epworth League, established by the Methodist Church as a lay organization intended to keep adolescent boys in the church. While the Epworth League was ostensibly open to both men and women, its real aim was to masculinize a church which was perceived to be dominated by a female membership and female-led organizations. This article explores when and how this construction of youthful piety became embedded within Methodism and the impact it had on the shape of church governance. Moreover, it argues that social Christianity, which gained a foothold through the mechanism of the League was an essentially male-gendered discourse.

Résumé

Cet article traite de la formation et du discours de la Ligue Epworth, une organisation laïque créée par l'Église méthodiste dans le but de garder les adolescents à l'église. Alors que la Ligue Epworth était soi-disant ouverte aux hommes et aux femmes, son véritable but était de masculiniser une Église perçue comme dominée par des fidèles féminines et par des organismes dirigés par des femmes. L'article étudie à quel moment et de quelle façon cette édification de la piété des jeunes s'est ancrée dans le méthodisme et l'influence qu'elle a eue sur la structure de gouvernance de l'Église. De plus, elle soutient que le christianisme social, qui s'est répandu grâce à la Ligue, tenait un discours masculin.

When a Baptist East End Mission opened in a working-class neighbourhood in Montreal in 1890, church leaders “were assailed by jeers of the unruly crowd of young men that attended the meetings, but also by the Public in the east end; some resorted to the press to expose their opposition to the Mission, others insultingly turned the workers from their doors if they approached with the object of presenting a tract.” The Mission happily reported that two years later these same young men regularly attended meetings, having

been drawn in by the Young Men's clubs.¹ It is clear from the Mission's Report that male membership was perceived as critical for church expansion and in a larger sense, one of the most fundamental issues for late-nineteenth-century Protestant denominations, and particularly for Methodism, was the pressing need to induce men to become church members at an earlier stage in their life-course.

As the recent work of Hannah Lane has shown, during the mid-nineteenth-century, church membership as opposed to mere church adherence was a largely adult phenomenon. Those individuals who did become committed church members earlier in life were most often women, but after marriage, the gender profile of church membership became more balanced.² Certainly clergymen were well attuned to the problem of membership since their livelihood depended upon the size of their congregation, but by the late nineteenth century, especially in larger urban areas such as Hamilton and Toronto, the intersection between church membership and church finance had become extremely problematic in the wake of massive church building campaigns which in turn saddled downtown Protestant churches with large burdens of debt.³ This problem was exacerbated by the movement of wealthier elements out of the downtown core. To an even greater degree than in previous decades, Protestant clergy had to depend upon small contributions from ever-larger numbers of people to sustain their congregations and consequently, to a far greater extent than in the past, ministerial

1 Canadian Baptist Archives, McMaster University, First Baptist Church, Montreal, "East End Mission Report," 26 December 1890.

2 For an excellent analysis which demonstrates how church membership was a minority experience in the nineteenth century and how the tendency for families of a mixed religious identity became increasingly common throughout the century, see Hannah Lane, "Methodist Church Members, Lay Leaders, and Socio-Economic Position in Mid-Nineteenth-Century St. Stephen, New Brunswick" (Ph.D. diss., University of New Brunswick, 2004). See also, Hannah Lane, "Tribalism, Proselytism, and Pluralism: Protestants, Family, and Denominational Identity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century St. Stephen, New Brunswick," in Nancy Christie, ed., *Households of Faith: Family, Gender and Community in Canada, 1760-1969* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 103-37. Similar conclusions have been advanced for late-nineteenth-century Ontario in Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). For an argument which asserts that family networks remained critical to evangelism, see Marguerite Van Die, "'The Marks of a Genuine Revival': Religion, Social Change, Gender and Community in Mid-Victorian Brantford, Ontario," *Canadian Historical Review* 79, no. 3 (September 1998): 524-63.

3 On the interconnection between finances and church polity, see, Hannah Lane, "Evangelicals, Church Finance and Wealth-Holding in Mid-Nineteenth-Century St. Stephen, New Brunswick and Calais, Maine," and Michael Gauvreau, "Factories and Foreigners: Church Life in Working-Class Neighbourhoods in Hamilton and Montreal, 1890-1930," in Michael Gauvreau and Ollivier Hubert, eds., *The Churches and Social Order in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 109-50, 225-73.

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effectiveness was a direct function of the clergyman's ability to expand church membership.⁴

The Epworth League, the subject of this paper, was established by the Methodist Church as a lay organization intended to keep adolescents in the church between Sunday School and marriage. While it was ostensibly open both to men and women, its real aim was to masculinize a church which was perceived to be dominated by a female membership and female-led organizations. This paper explores when and how this youthful construction of Christian piety became embedded in the discourse of Methodism and the impact it had on the shape of church governance. Because the Methodist Church was the largest Protestant denomination in Canada by the 1880s, the Epworth League is an ideal vehicle for understanding shifts within the broader cultural construction of youth which occurred in all the Protestant churches in the late nineteenth century. However, by contrast with the Baptist and Presbyterian young men's groups and brotherhoods, which were created by lay initiative within local churches, the Epworth League was the first highly bureaucratized and centralized denomination-wide association specifically designed to dramatically transform church polity.

Historians of Protestant religion have generally interpreted such youth movements as marginal to the meta-narrative of evangelicalism, not the least because they considered that these organizations were mainly concerned with children, who have not been seen as important actors within the Protestant churches.⁵ The Epworth League in particular has suffered from this bias but, as this paper will argue, it was one of the most critical sites not only for the articulation of a new evangelism, which introduced the notion of social Christianity

4 In Britain the correlation between religiosity and church membership (as opposed to adherence) began in the late eighteenth-century. See, Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). On this phenomenon in Canada, see Hannah Lane, "Re-numbering Souls: Methodism and Church Growth in St. Stephen, New Brunswick, 1861-1881" (M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1993). For a parallel process within Catholicism, see Christine Hudon and Ollivier Hubert, "The Emergence of a Statistical Approach to Social Issues in Administrative Practices of the Catholic Church in the Province of Quebec," in Gauvreau and Hubert, eds., *The Churches and Social Order*, 46-65. On the way in which the surveys of church membership evolved into the social survey, see Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *'A Full-Orbed Christianity': The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 165-96.

5 Neil Semple has a chapter on youth movements, but these are not seen as critical to the overall narrative of change apart from debates on conversion. Neil Semple, "'The Nurture and Admonition of the Lord': Nineteenth-Century Canadian Methodism's Response to 'Childhood'," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 14 (1981): 157-75; Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), Chapter Fourteen. For an approach which integrates youth organizations into broader themes, see Patricia Dirks, "Reinventing Christian Masculinity and Fatherhood: The Canadian Protestant Experience, 1900-1920," in Nancy Christie, ed., *Households of Faith*, 290-319.

into the broader Methodist discourse of conversion, but also the major body which decisively transformed the traditional link between family worship and the congregation, which had hitherto been the principal sites of Christian social reproduction. In redefining church membership as a key experience and attribute of youth, the Epworth League downplayed the significance of family worship. The Epworth League reoriented the focus of the social reproduction of faith around church-based structures such as the Sunday School and other specialized associations, and thus helped undermine the traditional authority structure which connected God, the clergyman, and the male head of household. In so doing, the Epworth League usurped the power of parents to socialize their children into religious life. Moreover, the introduction of modern methods of church expansion reflected the increasing specialization of society at large, when it fragmented the traditional church polity which had been centred on the congregation, into a host of age and gender specific organizations. Of equal significance, because youth organizations such as the Epworth League were created by the clergy and not the laity, they attempted to forge direct links between the clergy and future male officeholders, thus further contributing to the clericalization of the church. Finally, because youth organizations such as the Epworth League sought to introduce the new evangelism of social Christianity and a more intellectualized piety, they constituted a conscious campaign by the clergy to masculinize mainstream Protestantism.⁶

In her article, “‘The Marks of a Genuine Revival’,”⁷ Marguerite Van Die has posited that during the late nineteenth century, the creation of a host of lay organizations within Methodism was coincident with the rise of the middle class more broadly in Canadian society. From this position she has argued that the lay organizations were driven by and served middle-class aspirations and needs. In short, Van Die has concluded that Methodism itself became a largely middle-class denomination once it became more bureaucratic and specialized. This paper will argue that factors of age and gender were more critical to the redefinition of church citizenship than were issues of class. Although it might be argued that the Epworth League’s focus upon reading and an intelligent piety had a particular class inflection, I will argue that because Methodism remained

6 For a lengthier historiographic discussion and review of the international literature on religion and masculinity, see Nancy Christie, “Carnal Connection and Other Misdemeanors: Continuity and Change in Presbyterian Church Courts, 1830-90,” in Gauvreau and Hubert, eds., *The Churches and Social Order*, 66-108. For a recent treatment of late nineteenth-century Christian youth organizations in the American context, see Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2001). Although John Tosh is one of the foremost international historians of masculinity, I have not entered into a large discussion of his work because he does not explore the intersection of religion and masculinity. See Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

7 Van Die, “‘The Marks of a Genuine Revival.’”

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a socially mixed institution with a large constituency of lower middling sorts and skilled worker occupational cohorts, the key transformations within Methodism were not driven by class.⁸ Indeed, the ideal constituency of the Epworth League included male clerks, factory workers, and students. Hannah Lane has recently revised the embourgeoisement thesis by demonstrating that not only did Methodist church membership reflect the class complexion of the society as a whole, but that church membership itself was such a minority experience that it could not possibly have become a primary marker of class identity. This cross-class character of Methodism was not diminished by urbanization; rather, because urban spaces afforded greater and not lesser religious vitality for all social classes, class was not deemed to be a critical problem in this period. Age and gender, however, were critical determinants of church membership.

In the nineteenth century, as Lane has revealed, church membership was by and large a feature of adulthood; while women tended to join at various times throughout their life-course, the majority became members as adults, and men joined almost exclusively when they were married and much older.⁹ Not only was the Methodist Church becoming increasingly feminized in terms

8 This paper does not argue that class was irrelevant to the churches, but it does argue that church leaders feared that both middle-class and working-class men were not being properly socialized into church life. On the centrality of class to the shape of religious adherence, see Marks *Revivals and Roller Rinks*. Recent Canadian and international historical literature has revised the conventional view that secularization began with the working class. For a longer discussion of this international literature, see Gauvreau, "Factories and Foreigners," 225-73; Rosalyn Trigger, "Protestant Restructuring in the Canadian City: Church and Mission in the Industrial Working-Class District of Griffintown, Montreal," *Urban History Review* 31, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 5-18; Edward Smith, "Working-Class Anglicans: Religion and Identity in Victorian and Edwardian Hamilton, Ontario," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 35, no. 71 (Spring 2003): 123-44; Lucia Ferretti, *Entre voisins: la société paroissiale en milieu urbain: Saint-Pierre-Apôtre de Montréal, 1848-1930* (Montreal: Boréal, 1992); Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, "Modalities of Social Authority: Suggesting an Interface for Religion and Social History," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 35, no. 71 (Spring 2003): 1-30. For highlights of this revisionist perspective internationally, see Callum G. Brown, "The Costs of Pew-Renting: Church-Management, Church-Going and Social Class in Nineteenth-Century Glasgow," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 38 (1987): 347-61; S.J.D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Mark Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society: Oldham and Saddleworth, 1740-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); and the syntheses by Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848-1914* (London and New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); and Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*. For a very nuanced discussion of the intersection of class with Methodist identity, see Lane, "Methodist Church Members, Lay Leaders and Socio-Economic Position in Nineteenth-Century St. Stephen, New Brunswick," Chapter One.

9 See Lane, "Evangelicals, Church Finance, and Wealth-Holding," 129-34; Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *Churches and their Peoples in Canada, 1840-1965* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming), Chapter One. See also Mark A. Noll, ed., *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money, and the Market, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

of actual church membership — by the 1870s class meetings were four-fifths female and 68 percent of members were women¹⁰ — but the number of families which were religiously divided was increasing as the century progressed,¹¹ thus compromising, in the eyes of church leaders, the family's ability to provide religious socialization for children. The popular religious tendency to identify with a broader evangelical culture rather than with a specific denomination, which was a feature of small-town and rural Methodism in the mid-nineteenth century, was further exacerbated by the greater pluralism of the urban setting of the late Victorian period. Furthermore, the proclivity for men not to join churches, either because they had recently emigrated or because they wished to be free to visit several churches in order to court women, especially when they were free from family constraints, further aggravated the instability of denominational loyalty after 1880. In cities characterized by greater religious choice, together with increased financial burdens, the feminized congregation posed an insuperable problem which demanded new strategies, namely the creation of clerically controlled educational societies like the Epworth League, whose central purpose was to induce adolescent boys to become church members, active lay leaders, missionaries, or clergymen, and to indoctrinate them into a culture of denominational loyalty and active service which would result in a lifetime of systematic giving.

The first Epworth League was established in Barrie, Ontario, in 1889 by the Rev. R.N. Burns. Although the organizational structure was an American import, its real progenitor had been the Young People's Association which the Rev. Burns had founded at the Yonge St. Church in Toronto in 1883. The board members who ran the League, however, most of whom were urban clergymen, wished to create a more urban and sophisticated provenance for what was hailed as "the organized application of a new force to the Methodist machinery of our day," and thus claimed that it had been launched in Canada by Rev. William Withrow of Metropolitan Methodist in Toronto.¹² The Epworth League, which met at one of the evening prayer meetings, was intended to be an auxiliary of the church in so far as it was to contribute to "deepening the spirituality, broadening the intelligence, intensifying the loyalty, guiding the zeal and consecrating the giving of the Church of tomorrow" by training children in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord." In referring to the nurture of children, League promoters were not jettisoning the notion of conversion among children, as Neil Semple has maintained; rather what they saw as the central goal of Christian nurture was not a narrowly spiritual one but a civic

10 Lane, "Renumbering Souls," 338.

11 Ibid., 271.

12 Rev. A.M. Phillips, "A New Force," *Canadian Epworth Era* (hereafter *CEE*), 1, no. 5 (May 1889), 132.

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one, namely “to fill young people with denominational enthusiasm” and to “make them devoted church members,” and eventually loyal citizens.¹³ The turn towards youth — an all-encompassing category that included children as young as seven up to the entry into young adulthood at age twenty-one — was thus part of a broader process of denominational boundary-making which was a response to the long-standing pattern of multiple religious identities,¹⁴ which had been further complicated by the expansion of church building in urban centres. It was for this reason that the Epworth League replaced the Christian Endeavour movement which was deemed by Methodist leaders to be too inter-denominational in emphasis to serve the long term needs of the Church.¹⁵

Even though its promoters sought to defend the work of the League by viewing it as a direct descendant of John Wesley’s Holy Club at Oxford, it is clear that the great emphasis which it placed upon intensive study of the Bible, the development of literary culture among Methodists, and the promulgation of practical Christian service both within the church and in society at large, was intended to appeal to a very different constituency than did early Methodism. As one commentator remarked, “the age in which we live demands an intelligent Christianity,” by which he meant that new techniques must replace the oral transmission of piety which had characterized early Methodism.¹⁶ However much Epworth League leaders might have wished to show that their movement did not depart from Methodist traditions, it is clear that they had reinvented the notion of tradition to suit their own needs. Thus they claimed that Methodism was not simply a “church of the masses,” but of young people, and that it had begun primarily as a young men’s movement.¹⁷ Younger clergymen who witnessed the falling numbers of young people, and especially young men in the class meeting,¹⁸ campaigned for better methods which might keep youth coming to church after they left Sunday School and before they married. By contrast with earlier Methodist traditions, there was after the 1880s an ever greater focus on devising mechanisms which would induce early commitment

13 United Church Archives (hereafter UCA), Board of Religious Education (hereafter BRE), Box 1, file 1, “Minutes,” 18 July 1893, 28 September 1898, 5 May 1897; Semple, “The Nurture and the Admonition of the Lord.”

14 On this theme, see Lane, “Tribalism, Proselytism, and Pluralism,” 103-37.

15 Rev. A.M. Philips, “A New Force,” *CEE* 1, no. 5 (May 1889): 132.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 The class meeting was a group of ten to fifteen people of all age groups who were hoping to become adherents of Methodism. The purpose of the weekly class meeting was for the class leader to teach the Methodist discipline, to exhort prospective members towards greater spiritual introspection, and, ideally, those attending were expected to publicly declare their spiritual deficiencies and progress, all of which was supposed to lead to a conversion experience. In practice, these class meetings were not participatory and often involved a homily on the part of the class leader.

to full church membership status. Where in earlier decades the class meeting served to promote conversion at any point in the life-course, under the new strategy pursued by the Sunday School in tandem with the Epworth League, the decision to convert would ideally occur between the ages of five and six, and one's choice of religious allegiance must follow as quickly as possible. At first the Epworth League was designed for youth roughly between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, but, after a few years, children's meetings were instituted to specifically train boys in the notion of Christian stewardship.

With the introduction of the Epworth League, evening prayer meetings, previously open to all age groups, were transformed into age-specific League meetings which focused on alternate weeks upon missionary, temperance, social, and literary themes. Although this new vehicle for evangelism was smoothly introduced in urban churches, country churches with smaller, more intimate congregations were reluctant to give up one of their mid-week prayer meetings to youth, especially when these appeared to stress sociability rather than spiritual concerns.¹⁹ In many respects the Epworth League, in tandem with the Sunday School, replaced the class meeting as the central soul-saving mechanism within Methodism, a fact often alluded to by traditionalists within the church who objected to the new youth-centred style of evangelism. Where, previously, young adults gave public testimony of their conversion either in the class meeting or before the congregation, by the late nineteenth century, when public confession had become anathema, training both in confession and public speaking had shifted to the Epworth prayer meeting, where young people were no longer judged by their elders but by their peers.²⁰ While the Epworth League remained at its core a "revival agency" whose principal aim was "to save souls," the idea that it must also promote "an earnest, intelligent, practical religion"²¹ through literary and social evenings devoted to reading and intellectual discussion was candidly designed "to draw in men."²²

Since it was not customary for Methodist children under the age of fifteen to become church members, the sacred precincts of the church were largely the domain of married adults. It is little wonder that the elevation of youth within the church met with considerable resistance, for what the Epworth League was espousing was a dramatic reversal of the age hierarchy within the denomination: as it was stated in 1914, the only human institutions that could be considered truly vital were those which contributed to the develop-

19 UCA, BRE, Box 7, "Christian Guardian clippings" (hereafter "CG Clippings"), "The Country League," 11 December 1895.

20 Ibid., "Latent Talent," 20 November 1895. On the implications for popular participation that the demise of public testimony had within Protestantism generally, see Christie and Gauvreau, *Churches and their Peoples*, Chapter One.

21 UCA, BRE, Box 6, A.C. Crews, *Annual Report*, 1 September 1896.

22 Ibid., Box 7, "Minutes," 19 June 1895.

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ment of youth.²³ This age-specific or “graded evangelism” flew in the face of Methodist tradition largely because it destabilized the power of the older office-holders and because it interfered with the “mingling of membership”²⁴ of old and young people. League promoters took pains to show that their organization would not supplant older Methodist practices and that it would act the part of the child within the home to work with, rather than against, parental authority in a renewed interdependent relationship in which the youth inspired the old and the old counseled the young. Even defenders of the League, such as the Rev. W.H. Hincks of Queen Street Methodist, who recognized the powerful role that youthful converts played in reawakening the spiritual warmth of his church, instructed the young to continue to attend the regular prayer meetings and the class meeting because he thought it “a most unfortunate thing for the young folks to be separated from the old.”²⁵ Many clergymen complained that the Epworth League undermined the authority of the minister and the independence of the local congregation, because it had its own headquarters and complex bureaucratic machinery which allowed it to function as a separate power base.²⁶ To counteract the impression that the League was created to challenge the prestige of the local minister, numerous articles appeared in the *Christian Guardian*, which highlighted the positive contributions the League might make in aiding the modern clergyman who, in his new role in serving the public good, was increasingly weighted down with tasks beyond the Sunday service.²⁷ In an article entitled “How Can the League Help the Pastor?” the writer showed how youth dramatically helped increase the financial contributions to the church by welcoming “strangers” and encouraging more regular attendance, especially among other young people.²⁸ At Queen Street Methodist in Toronto, the League claimed to have revitalized the cottage prayer meetings (small group devotional meetings in private homes), established an employment bureau, created a handshaking committee for newcomers, and taken over the onerous task of hospital visitation.

Despite the sporadic criticism of clergymen, most of the Epworth Leagues were created by the clergymen as a way to engender loyalty to the ministry among those who were destined to become the most powerful lay officeholders of the next generation. Thus, although ostensibly a lay movement, the Epworth

23 Ibid., 1:2, “CG Clippings,” 8 July 1914.

24 Ibid., Rev. John Lock, “The Relation between Our Old and Young People,” 17 June 1896.

25 Ibid., 13 April 1898.

26 Ibid., 27 April 1898.

27 On this new role of the church in liberal society, see Kenneth L. Draper, “Finishing Badly: Religion, Authority, and Clergy in Late-Victorian London, Ontario,” in Gauvreau and Hubert, eds., *The Churches and the Social Order*, 155.

28 UCA, BRE, Box 7, “How Can the League Help His Pastor?”

Leagues served to reinforce the movement towards greater clericalization of the church. If sites of congregational power were being usurped by the creation and work of the new youth organizations, it was those realms traditionally occupied by women, namely the charitable, visiting, and missionary activities, which were the most affected by the new ideal of male Christian service which the Epworth Leagues so adamantly promoted.²⁹

The most pungent criticism of the Epworth League related to the impact it had upon the core of Methodist identity — evangelism. Traditionalists within Methodism argued that the emphasis the League placed upon literary and social pursuits diminished the evangelical spirit of Methodism. This criticism has often been identified by historians as evidence that evangelicalism was in fact on the wane during the late nineteenth century: for example, George Rawlyk has posited that after mid-century the “old religious language about the New Birth and revivalism no longer defined the changing experience and practice of a growing number of Canadian Protestants.” Rawlyk further suggested that this transformed evangelicalism “down-played traditional conversionism” because it placed more emphasis on the “spread of scriptural holiness by reforming the nation.”³⁰ If anything, the Epworth League revitalized the spiritual warmth of the congregation because it built upon a religious pattern within congregations whereby youthful conversion was seen to be the inspiration for the timing of protracted meetings.³¹ As one city pastor observed in 1898, young people had been “among my most faithful attenders and helpful helpers in my prayer meetings” and “in a number of cases urged me to direct efforts for the saving of souls.”³² That young people were thought to constitute the backbone of evangelism was alluded to by several clergy: Rev. W.H. Hincks of Queen St. Methodist in Toronto observed that seventy-five Epworth Leaguers had stood up to announce their conversions, while another minister rejected the notion that young people only came to League meetings

29 On the conflicts between the Epworth League and the Women’s Missionary Societies, see UCA, BRE, 1:1, “Minutes,” 18 July 1893.

30 For this interpretation, see “Introduction” in George Rawlyk, ed., *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), xvi-xvii; William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989); David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1940); Phyllis Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992).

31 On this theme, see Christie and Gauvreau, *Churches and their Peoples*, Chapter One. For a continuation of this theme within the Epworth League, see UCA, BRE, 1:2, “CG Clippings,” 3 March 1897.

32 UCA, BRE, “CG Clippings,” 13 April 1898.

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for the entertainment, pointing to the fact that over 201 youth had converted at a prayer meeting.³³

Rather than undermining the conventional focus upon the new birth or conversion, the founding of the Epworth League merely added another site where conversion could occur and transformed it into an experience of childhood and youth rather than adulthood. Historians have often conflated evangelicalism, with its emphasis upon a conversion experience, with mass revivalism, and, because of this assumption, they have concluded that once revivals declined, evangelicalism weakened as the central dynamic of Methodism. By overprivileging revival campaigns over the day-to-day workings of soul saving within the local congregation, historians have often ignored the fact that there existed several competing approaches to conversion and spiritual awakening.³⁴ For example, in the nineteenth century, the class meeting, local protracted meetings, the Quarterly meeting, as well as private visiting and personal contact between family and friends, were all regarded as sites for conversion. By the late nineteenth century these had been expanded to include the Sunday School, the Epworth League, and the Junior Epworth League; what was new was that these focused primarily upon the youngest age cohort within the church. Evangelicalism had not declined; rather the sacred venues where conversion could occur had multiplied beyond the church congregation and become more specialized, often targeting specific age groups.

The 1870s saw an exponential increase in interest among clergymen, especially urban clergy,³⁵ in childhood conversion, largely because the Sunday School had been shown to be one of the most successful means of furnishing new church members. Based on statistical evidence from St. Stephen, New Brunswick, Hannah Lane has shown that in 1862 a mere three percent of church members were derived from the Sunday School; by 1890 this number had increased to nineteen percent, and by the early twentieth century fully sixty percent of new church members were spiritually socialized in the Sunday School and not in the home.³⁶ Rather than expunging the notion of conversion, as Neil Semple has contended, the Sunday School actually reaffirmed the centrality of conversion to Methodism by instituting Decision Days in which very young children were encouraged to commit to Christ; to this end a Cradle Roll

33 On the Hornerite claim that the Leagues were only leisure clubs bereft of spiritual content, see UCA, BRE, Box 7, "CG Clippings," "A Mistake Corrected," 20 April 1898, and "The League and the Pastor," 13 April 1898; Miss Bessie Scott, "Place of the League in the Church" *CEE* 1, no. 1 (January 1899): 5.

34 On the decline of the revival, see Semple, *The Lord's Dominion*; Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*.

35 UCA, BRE, 1.1, "Sabbath School Convention and Annual Meeting," 1879. All the talks on childhood conversion were by urban ministers who were also prominent in the Epworth League.

36 Lane, "Re-Numbering Souls."

for babies was established in 1898.³⁷ As an exponent of this new evangelism stated, "Let Sabbath school teachers study to convert and not just educate."³⁸ The idea of conversion had not been expurgated from Methodism, but it had shifted both temporally and spatially from adulthood to childhood, from the class meeting to the Sunday School. As Methodist leaders began to place growing importance upon the religious experience of children, they also began to criticize parents who had traditionally catechized their offspring.³⁹ Instead of viewing parents as key components in the social reproduction of religion, they were now seen to be the more passive receptors of youthful spiritual vitality. This role reversal between parents and children had larger implications because it ushered in a new construction of evangelicalism in which personal conversion was now seen as a fundamental experience of youth. "Most persons who are Christian," wrote a critic of the old-style class meeting, "were converted in early life. All religious statistics bear out this statement, and yet with this undisputed truth staring us in the face, the Church often tries to turn the sinner to God only after he has become old and hardened and unimpressionable."⁴⁰ Evangelicalism had not waned by the end of the nineteenth century, but its place in the life course had altered dramatically in so far as it included all age cohorts "from the youngest infant to the oldest patriarch."⁴¹

The crux of the debate between Epworth League promoters and traditionalists within Methodism was not over the issue of conversion, but over the efficacy of mass revivalism to produce Methodist church members. It is significant that Rev. Nathanael Burwash, one of the chief advocates of the Epworth League, was also a vociferous opponent of large revival campaigns.⁴² Proponents of the League, most of whom were clergymen in large urban centres like Toronto, Hamilton, and London, believed that the urge to conformity and the mass techniques of the large-scale revivals only further served to eradicate the personal in an age already dominated by a welter of bureaucratic machinery in education, business, the churches, and society. As one writer noted, "You

37 Semple, "The Nurture and Admonition of the Lord"; for a revisionist perspective, see Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*, 97, 102. It is significant that Rev. Hincks, who conceived the idea of Decision Day in Sunday School, was the minister at a large urban church, Queen Street Methodist in Toronto, and was a great defender of the Epworth League.

38 UCA, BRE, 1:2, "CG Clippings," "How to Save the Young People," 2 September 1896; "The Will of the Teacher," 12 June 1896; "The Prize Competition," 2 September 1896. The latter claimed that parents did not adequately seek salvation for their children.

39 Miss Wellstood, "Save the Children," *CEE* 1, no. 2 (February 1899): 39; "Influence of the School in the Family, *The Sunday School Banner* 2, no. 12 (December 1869).

40 Wellstood, "Save the Children," 39.

41 UCA, BRE, 3:2, S.T. Bartlett, "Our Sunday School Record"; "Minutes," 5 July 1910. Rather than the family bringing children to church, the church now came into the home in the form of *The Sunday School Banner*, which was written both for children and parents.

42 On Burwash's opposition to mass revivals, see Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*, 129.

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cannot save the masses, or the lower classes, or the higher classes, or the submerged tenth, or the other convenient rhetorical groups of people.”⁴³ In short, there could be no “salvation by machinery,” for religion was personal and individual, and thus its methods must be designed so as to relieve the sense of anomie that was considered endemic to the modern city, where it was believed the individual was becoming merged into the mass.⁴⁴ To be truly effective, soul winning had to be done on a one-to-one basis, through personal work, either by home visiting or through social contact.⁴⁵ To this end, the critical aspect of Epworth League work was the Lookout Committee which hosted social evenings designed to entice the floating population of single, migrant youth into the church. As one writer put it, the *modus operandi* of the League was to have young men “hunting out and collecting strangers.”⁴⁶ As the *Christian Guardian* observed in 1895:

It ought to be practically impossible for any stranger to get in and out of a Methodist church anywhere without a hearty hand-shake from some of its members. There are doubtless many people in the Church through influence of revival services, and many others are church members because their parents were before them, but quite a contingent in every church have been brought in by means of some social influence. Let there be in all our Leagues and churches a warm, social atmosphere.⁴⁷

Old methods of evangelism which depended upon the personal visiting of the clergyman were now reinvented for the modern urban reality. Conversion was now accomplished not through the personal family connections; rather, the key was the bonds of friendship, where the influence of personal character could bring about the desired result. The central aim of the Epworth social evening was “to assist in lifting up some one who needs to be reminded that he has human friends who will help him to find the best Friend of all.”⁴⁸ The Epworth League’s methods were strategically adapted to the courtship patterns of youth in order to stop young men from moving from church to church in search of young women.⁴⁹ For example, J.J. Kelso, the well-known child welfare reformer, did not wish to become a member of Gould St. Presbyterian Church prior to his marriage (where he was later one of its key officeholders), not because he lacked faith, for he was a committed evangelical, but because he

43 “Concerning Personal Religion,” *CEE* 7, no. 3 (March 1905): 54.

44 Mrs Walvin, “Entertaining an Angel,” *CEE* 7, no. 6 (June 1905); “Machinery,” *CEE* 3, no. 7 (July 1901): 195.

45 Rev. John McLean, “Won by One,” *CEE* 1, no. 10 (October 1899): 296-7.

46 Miscellaneous, *CEE* 7, no. 6 (June 1905); UCA, BRE, 7, “CG Clippings,” “A Church Register,” 20 November 1895.

47 UCA, BRE, 1:2, “CG Clippings,” 19 June 1895.

48 Bessie Scott, “Place of the League in the Church,” *CEE* 1, no. 1 (January 1899): 5.

49 UCA, BRE, Box 7, “How Can the League Help the Pastor,” n.d.

wished to attend as many churches as possible with the explicit aim of meeting eligible young women.⁵⁰ What the Methodist leadership feared above all was that this peripatetic approach to courtship would in turn lead to even greater numbers of mixed marriages, which would ultimately debilitate the church's ability to expand and financially sustain itself. In consequence, new evangelistic methods were designed to encourage youth to meet, court their spouse, marry, and raise their children all within the Methodist Church. However much the social department of the League was criticized for sponsoring "unspiritual" leisure activities, such attacks from traditionalists were quickly defused for it could always be contended that the large Epworth League conventions and their talks on courtship and marriage led to "young people marrying in the faith and starting Christian homes."⁵¹

In a 1905 article entitled "How the Social Committee May Win Souls," Delia Fallis offered the insight that social gatherings within the church were one of the most effective means to influence the unchurched because the heterosexual friendships formed there "lead men to the foot of the cross, almost without them being aware that they are being led."⁵² To show how the Epworth Leagues were successful in using their social committees to entice otherwise uncommitted and mobile young men into the Methodist fold, the diary of Frank Roberts, a twenty-one year old English immigrant working-class lad, is most revealing. Roberts arrived in Toronto in 1906 when the Epworth Leagues had become well established within the Methodist Church. This was the second time Frank Roberts had emigrated to Canada; he had previously worked in various unskilled jobs in western Canada and in the lumber camps of Northern Ontario. However, his father, a Methodist preacher, had greater ambitions for his feckless son, who had already failed an earlier apprenticeship to a draper in England, and advised him to return to Canada so that he might find "a more civilized way of making a living" than laboring work. Another motive for emigration was that Roberts also had had intercourse with several young girls in England, one of whom was pregnant.⁵³

50 Library and Archives of Canada (hereafter LAC), J.J. Kelso Papers, MG 30 C97, Journal, 28 July 1886, 30 January 1887, 13 May 1888. "Tonight I listened to an admirable sermon by Mr. Milligan, but I must confess that even while listening to his eloquent exposition of gospel truths, my thoughts at times turned to a beautiful girl who sat near me," 2 July 1887. It is apparent from his journal entries prior to his marriage that Kelso derived little spiritual sustenance from the sermon as he spent most of his time in church gawking at attractive women. Kelso was also a subscriber to *The Canadian Epworth Era*.

51 UCA, BRE, Box 7, "CG Clippings," 2 September 1896, 3 March 1897.

52 Miss Delia M. Fallis, "How the Social Committee May Win Souls," *CEE* 7, no. 1 (January 1905): 20.

53 LAC, Frank Roberts Diary, 3 March 1907, 15 March 1907. His parents were 65 years old and Roberts believed they had insufficient savings for old age, so he was compelled to seek employment abroad, despite his strong family ties.

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It seems that, despite his strict Methodist upbringing, Frank Roberts had never wholly conformed to the church's moral precepts, even when he was living with his parents in England, for church going was seen merely as a means to meet girls. His choice of churches was dictated largely by the female objects of his affection and even one of the most spiritual highlights of the Methodist calendar, the New Year's Watchnight Service, was commended by Roberts because it afforded him an opportunity of "kissing the Watkinson girls." Indeed, he often attended several church services on Sunday because he could see his brother in the morning, walk out with Susannah Cowling in the afternoon, and see Kitty in the evening with whom he "had some fun in the fields."⁵⁴ Given Roberts' romantic proclivities, it is not surprising that his first observation of Toronto was that while it offered him a job as a sales clerk in the hat department at Eaton's department store at \$6.00 per week, its primary drawback was that "good-looking girls are not to be seen."⁵⁵ Although Roberts liked the sociability that Eaton's provided for young workers, he began to take a stenographer's course which garnered him jobs paying marginally better, but which, because they employed male clerks only, further decreased his opportunities to meet women.⁵⁶ It is perhaps for this reason that one of the main target groups of the Epworth League was clerks, who were particularly affected by the anomie of a large city.⁵⁷ Roberts referred constantly in his diary to the many lonely evenings he spent despondently walking the streets of Toronto in search of female companionship. However, his low wages precluded him from dating eligible young women. Frank Roberts' yearning to be upwardly mobile was in part impelled by his own desire to "be a man worthy of his parents,"⁵⁸ but equally strong was his desire to make "respectable wages,"⁵⁹ which would enable him to court and eventually marry the woman of his choice.

To salve his loneliness, Roberts began attending church services at Metropolitan Methodist, Sherbourne Street Methodist, Carlton Street Methodist, and "Cook's Presbyterian"; but he confirmed all the fears of Methodist clergymen when on 25 December he attended St. Michael's Cathedral with Miss Sadie Martin, "thus entering a Roman Catholic Church for the first time."⁶⁰ Although meeting women was certainly a priority for Roberts, he was not averse to the spiritual side of church attendance and commented extensively on the quality

54 Ibid., 1 January 1907, 3 March 1907.

55 Ibid., 15 March 1907.

56 Ibid., 9 December 1907, 12 January 1908.

57 See advertisement for business colleges in *CEE*; UCA, BRE, "GC Clippings," "Impressions on the Way," 27 July 1898, which describes how in Truro, Nova Scotia, the shops closed early so that the clerks and men of business could attend the Epworth League prayer services.

58 LAC, Frank Roberts Diary, 1 January 1908.

59 Ibid., 12 January 1908.

60 Ibid., 25 December 1907.

of the sermons at various churches.⁶¹ Roberts was not irreligious; however, he did not wholly observe the Sabbath according to the Methodist discipline. Most Sundays began with Roberts visiting his male friends in their boarding houses, where they smoked and chatted about boxing and their careers. Each Sunday afternoon he attended the weekly temperance meeting at Massey Hall, and he was a sufficiently committed Christian that when he heard Rev. Wilkinson of the anti-profanity league speak on the necessity of taking the pledge he refused to do so, even though many other men did, “knowing it was a promise he might not keep.”⁶² Similarly, he did not become a committed church member, knowing that he could not, as yet, live up to the high standards of the Methodist faith.

The clergyman who most attracted Roberts’ attention was the associate minister at Sherbourne Methodist, Rev. George Jackson, who, like Roberts, had recently emigrated from England where he had become a devotee of Hugh Price Hughes and his city mission movement. Although a great defender of Methodism’s evangelistic ideal, he was also a great advocate of modern methods: as a result he abandoned the class meeting and the mass revival in favour of the Epworth League, because he believed the latter would encourage more people to come to church.⁶³ Indeed, one of the principal reasons that Roberts continued to attend Sherbourne Methodist was that Jackson regularly invited young people to the church parlour following the Sunday evening service. Upon spying Miss Murphy from his stenography class there, Roberts immediately promised “to join the Epworth League, and am going to call on Miss Murphy to-morrow night, when she will take me there & introduce me round.”⁶⁴ A few weeks later, when by chance he attended All Saint’s English Church “for want of a better place,” he was likewise enticed to join their Young People’s group; but he drifted back the Methodist Church’s social hour for coffee, cake, and introductions to several girls whom he kept laughing the whole evening.⁶⁵ Roberts eventually abandoned Sherbourne Methodist in favour of Metropolitan Methodist because, as he said, “the people are more in my class of society there.” There were other contributing factors to his sense of feeling more at home at Metropolitan Methodist: he now wished to avoid Sherbourne Methodist because he was no longer interested in Miss Murphy; his friend Bob Aspinwall was a member of Metropolitan Methodist; its choir contained some of the prettiest young women whom he knew from Eaton’s; and the Epworth League provided a welcoming atmosphere for youth. Both Roberts and the church found this arrangement beneficial: the church welcomed Roberts to

61 Ibid., 19 January 1908, 2 February 1908.

62 Ibid., 5 January 1908.

63 For a description of Jackson’s career, see Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*, 88-94.

64 LAC, Frank Roberts Diary, 2 February 1908.

65 Ibid., 23 February 1908.

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the choir, even though he could not sing a note, because this induced him to become a church member; and Roberts hoped to use the choir as a means of increasing his courtship prospects.

Just as Delia Fallis had indicated, the friendships thus formed through the Epworth League were instrumental to his becoming slowly drawn into the process of conversion. After the choir had performed at Elm Street Methodist, one of the most evangelical congregations in the city, Roberts described an evangelical service in which eight people had come forward to profess conversion. Although Roberts doubted the veracity of their conversion, he nevertheless was sufficiently affected by the evangelical sermon to think himself too unworthy to be in a position to make a public declaration. Roberts did not reject conversion because he was a skeptic, but because he understood conversion as a process which "revolutionized" one's whole being. Roberts was troubled enough about his spiritual state, however, to wonder how he would go about becoming a Christian, asking whether it was sufficient merely to repent: "I am sorry for all the wrong I have ever done now, but that doesn't seem to help me out any." Although his language is not as tortured as earlier manifestations of intense piety, Roberts was experiencing the same period of darkness which conventionally preceded the new birth. Despite his reservations about his capacity to live consistently as a Christian, Roberts continued to attend the Elm Street mission, admitting about their services, "I think they do me good, temporarily at least, and I am quite willing to be made as good as possible. I hope I shall derive lasting benefit from them in the end."⁶⁶ One week after joining the choir, Roberts became a full member of Metropolitan Methodist and continued to attend revival services at Elm Street Methodist, where his friends Bob Aspinwall and Miss Elsie plead for his conversion, but as Roberts ruefully admitted "I will prove a hard case."⁶⁷

In addition to the social atmosphere of the Epworth League meetings, Roberts was further stirred spiritually when he attended the regular Sunday afternoon meeting at Massey Hall, where a lecture informing the audience of young men on the correlation between spiritual perfection and the pursuit of upward mobility through work, compelled, Roberts to observe, "It made me more determined than ever to make something worthwhile of myself and I hope I shall stick to my resolution."⁶⁸ Having absorbed the ideals of Christian manliness through the League and the male temperance meetings, Roberts began in the ensuing weeks to chastise himself for going to the theatre and being idle in the evening rather than applying himself to his studies. He began to spurn the friendship of his old companions, whose sexual mores he now regarded

⁶⁶ Ibid., 8 March 1908.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 11 March 1908, 14 March 1908.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 22 March 1908.

with opprobrium, and refused to hear an anarchist lecture at the Labour Temple because of the low characters in the audience.⁶⁹ Following Rev. George Jackson's lecture to men on the afterlife, which Roberts praised for its scientific and spiritual qualities, he began to more seriously contemplate his spiritual state, but reflected that thinking alone would not bring about a conversion without acting also on the "promptings of my heart."⁷⁰ As Roberts' diary concludes, he still occasionally dropped in at the Labour Temple to play pool and smoke with his former acquaintances,⁷¹ but the Epworth League had insinuated itself into his life and had reoriented his sociability around the precepts of Christian living. We last see Roberts, who has now shifted to a Christian boarding house in an uptown neighbourhood, spending his evenings singing hymns with his fellow boarders.⁷²

As the case of Frank Roberts makes clear, the Epworth Leagues were the most successful in large urban centres, where their homey social evenings could effectively counteract the sense of anomie experienced by young immigrants to the city. The Epworth League movement was also a distinctly urban phenomenon because its central purpose was to redress the financial problems faced by large metropolitan congregations. A constant trope in Epworth League literature was the theme of large downtown congregations swamped in debt being rescued by the Epworth League.⁷³ Thus even wealthy congregations, such as Sherbourne Methodist Church in Toronto, instituted a Giving Band within the Epworth League to encourage young children to give seven cents per week.⁷⁴ It is noteworthy that most annual conferences featured talks on "Systematic Giving," "Soul-Winning," "The Young Men In and Out of Church," and "Citizenship," which together encapsulated the new evangelism and drew a more overt and gendered connection between personal salvation and monetary contribution to the church.⁷⁵ The idea that true manhood rested upon loyalty to an institution and that this loyalty was demonstrated through systematic giving was a theme returned to time and again in Epworth League publications. The ideal role model was Robert Clark from Bridge St. Methodist who, because

69 Ibid., 19 March 1908, 26 March 1908, 7 April 1908, 12 April 1908. Roberts refused the services of a prostitute who lived in the boarding house next door for fear that it would ruin his reputation both in terms of his work and his religious status; however, he did lend his friend one dollar to partake.

70 Ibid., 29 May 1908.

71 Ibid., 14 May 1908.

72 Ibid., 14 May 1908, 14 June 1908.

73 Miscellaneous, *CEE* 1, no. 2 (February 1899); Archives Nationales du Québec, St. James Methodist Church, Montreal, Epworth League Quarterly Meeting, 18 May 1903. By contrast Port Perry Methodist was hailed as a success story because it was out of debt, largely due to the activities of the Epworth League. See, UCA, BRE, "Clippings," 4 December 1895.

74 UCA, BRE, Box 7, "Minutes," 27 January 1897.

75 Ibid., "Toronto Conference Convention," 9 March 1898.

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he had converted when young, gave all his money earned on his paper route to the church when he died at the age of fifteen.⁷⁶ The underlying message in all the stories about boys was that once you converted you must immediately become a church member. In addition, the neophyte male church member was instructed to give at least one-tenth of his earnings to the church, and, as the Rev. W. McMullen pungently remarked, "A young man in a church who is not willing to help that church in every way possible, is hardly a fair specimen of young manhood."⁷⁷

It is because of the growing financial imperatives within Methodism that the discourse in the Epworth League's publications was overwhelmingly aimed at recruiting young men. The appeal of the men's youth organizations, however, was cross-class in character: there were frequent references to young men of business, but just as often there were articles such as "Wouldn't Marry a Mechanic," which extolled the benefits of marrying a skilled worker; or observations such as that offered by the Rev. McMullen in "The Young Man in the Home," which advised young men to remember that even if one's father lacked education "he never lacked manhood."⁷⁸ As one article in the *Canadian Epworth Era* explicitly stated, the League's ideal target group was clerks, men in factories, and students.⁷⁹ The dominant theme of the 1899 Epworth Convention in British Columbia concerned the construction of Christian manliness: The Rev. J.C. Speer's talk, "Shirkers, Jerkers and Workers," was apparently received with particular enthusiasm, while Miss Yea addressed the audience on the problem "Are businessmen Able to Live up to the Ethics of the New Testament."⁸⁰ At the Goderich meeting, talks included "How to Keep the Grown-Up Boys and Young Men in the Sabbath School" and "How to Secure a Larger Attendance of Young Men."⁸¹ Likewise, at Long Point, addresses such as "Christian Citizenship" and "The Manhood of Christ" were intended to draw young, single men into the church.⁸²

The overriding preoccupation of the new cadre of clerical and lay leaders who promoted the Epworth League was how to counteract the feminization of the Methodist church in which the class and prayer meetings were dominated by women. Of course the League was never explicitly organized as a gender specific organization, but it did frequently caution against naming women to

76 UCA, BRE, 1:2, "Clippings," 28 July 1897.

77 Rev. W. McMullen, "The Young Man in Business," *CEE* 7, no. 4 (April 1905): 104; "A Young Man's Earnings," *CEE* 5, no. 2 (February 1903): 36.

78 Rev. McMullen, "The Young Man in the Home," *CEE* 7, no. 3 (March 1905): 75; "Wouldn't Marry a Mechanic," *CEE* 1, no. 5 (May 1899): 130.

79 "Increasing Membership," *CEE* 7, no. 3 (March 1905): 54.

80 *CEE* 1, no. 7 (July 1899): 122.

81 *CEE*, 1, no. 2 (February 1899): 21.

82 *CEE* 1, no. 1 (January 1899): 22.

be Presidents of local leagues. Not only did women members of the League outnumber men two to one,⁸³ but most of its leadership and public speaking functions were dominated by women. The Tamworth Epworth League was presided over by Miss Aylesworth and all its vice-presidents were female.⁸⁴ Even in large industrial centres such as Hamilton, the President of the League was a Miss Effie Taylor, whose overriding concern was raising funds for Chinese missions.⁸⁵ Apart from opening addresses by clergyman, all the speeches at the Guelph, St. Catharines, and Strathroy district conventions were delivered by women.⁸⁶ The constant barrage of talks about Christian masculinity did move the “young men question” to the forefront of the church, and the discourse on Christian manhood promulgated by the Epworth League did have some effect in so far as most of the League presidents were men by 1905.⁸⁷

It was soon recognized that the female dominated Leagues focused upon more traditional themes, such as missionary work and revivalism, and thus a central imperative of the League was to transform the work of evangelism into a studiously male endeavour. Missionary work, traditionally the purview of female fund-raisers, was now portrayed as “chivalric,” where “the soldier element in Christianity is dominant”;⁸⁸ the Christian home was redefined as a domain for the making of Christian manhood;⁸⁹ Bible Sword Drills and Missionary Baseball were introduced to the Junior Epworth League;⁹⁰ and evangelism itself was reinvented as a manly and warlike endeavour in which preachers were described as an “invading army of evangelists.” Methodism was now reconstructed, not as a religion in which individuals passively subjugated themselves to the will of God, but as “an uncompromising aggressive force for the conquest of the world.”⁹¹ More significantly, a core tradition of Methodism, the focus upon the family as the primary site for spiritual training, was called into question, not least because family religion was now seen to be a primarily female domain. The campaign spearheaded by the Epworth League to socialize children within the church rather than within the home was in fact a further attack upon the dominance of female piety within Methodism. In an article entitled “A Boy’s Religion,” old-time Methodism was derided as old-fashioned by being linked to the practice of grandmothers catechizing their male grand-

83 Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion*, 385.

84 *CEE* 1, no. 3 (March 1899): 88; UCA, BRE, Box 7, “Clippings,” 21 October 1896.

85 *CEE* 1, no. 1 (January 1899): 27.

86 *Ibid.*, 23.

87 “Provincial Convention,” *CEE* 2, no. 11 (November 1900): 349.

88 “Epworth League and Missions,” *CEE* 1, no. 1 (January 1899): 12.

89 John Hall, “The Christian Home: How to Make it and How to Maintain It,” *CEE* 1, no. 7 (July 1899): 97.

90 “Junior Epworth League of Central Methodist Church,” *CEE* 1, no. 3 (March 1899).

91 “An Aggressive Force,” *CEE* 1, no. 1 (January 1899): 2.

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children. The obvious equation between women, old age, and obsolete religion was in turn juxtaposed with new evangelistic methods in which young men could go to Sunday School, study (and not just read) the Bible, go to prayer meeting (the Epworth League meeting), and go regularly to church where “no one wants them to give up the natural rights and feelings of boyhood.”⁹²

The special appeal by the League to young men in turn influenced the way in which evangelicalism was defined: it shifted from an oral tradition (read female culture of family prayer) to a print medium focused on Bible study, and was tightly controlled by male clergy. Even conservatives like Albert Carman defended this new literate style of Methodism believing that reading church literature would enhance denominational loyalty and “save souls.”⁹³ Methodist youth were not only urged to subscribe to the *Christian Guardian*, but the purchase of various Sunday School and youth publications were now seen as benchmarks by which to measure one’s faith. As one contributor to the *Christian Guardian* stated, the best way to test the sincerity of revival was to see how many people were willing to buy the church newspaper.⁹⁴ Buying church publications formed yet another means of raising funds. To this end each Epworth League member had to purchase *The Epworth Manual*, which cost twenty-five cents, and each participant in the very popular Epworth Reading Courses (which had been designed to reach young men)⁹⁵ was constrained to purchase several books.⁹⁶ Whatever their purpose, the vast array of printed material now on offer within Methodism had drastically altered older methods of spiritual awakening, which depended primarily upon the oral culture of the class meeting, the sermon, and the prayer meeting. Books and literature were now seen as part and parcel of the modern church; as the author of “Building a Nation for God” argued, modern industrial society demanded greater efficiency and thus its skilled work force must be better educated. This new imperative within Methodism in turn decreed that its members must be able to read.⁹⁷ In this regard the new literate evangelism, which was being promoted principally by the Epworth League, was another means to encourage working-class uplift, and articles, such as “Pushing to the Front,” showed how the modern church served as an avenue whereby working-class men could attend university.⁹⁸ More importantly, the Epworth League’s stress upon conversion as both a spiri-

92 “A Boy’s Religion,” *CEE* 2, no. 5 (May 1900): 42.

93 UCA, BRE, Box 6, “CG Clippings,” Albert Carman, General Superintendent of the Methodist Church, “An Open Letter to Epworth Leagues and other Young Peoples Societies,” 1 September 1897.

94 UCA, BRE, Box 7, “CG Clippings,” 5 February 1896; *Ibid.*, 1:1, “Joint Sunday School and Epworth League Board,” 15 September 1891.

95 *Ibid.*, 3 March 1897.

96 *Ibid.*, Box 6, miscellaneous.

97 *Ibid.*, 3:2, 29 September 1912.

98 *Ibid.*, Box 7, “CG Clippings,” “Pushing to the Front,” n.d.

tual and an intellectual awakening led to the creation of literary departments and reading courses whose purpose was to instruct youth not only in Methodist doctrines but in science, history, political economy, and literature.⁹⁹ It appears that the literature meetings were assumed to be for men and were used as a way to attract men to prayer meetings, on the supposition that men needed greater intellectual stimulation alongside narrowly spiritual prayers. These subjects were explicitly promoted as a way to “save the boys,”¹⁰⁰ not only from the temptations of secular amusements, but to create a class of educated male laity better fitted to lead the complex organizational machinery characteristic of the modern church.

The drive to masculinize Methodism was one of the main forces behind the reconstruction of the new evangelism which, as Phyllis Airhart has argued, began to occur in the 1890s. Because much resistance to this new “thoughtful Christianity”¹⁰¹ remained, it was largely promoted in the new Epworth Leagues, where its bias towards higher criticism and social questions could be introduced with little fanfare to the new generation of leaders in the church. It is significant, therefore, that Nathanael Burwash, the Chancellor of Victoria College, who has generally been regarded as a moderate able to construct a theology which grafted new notions of scientific induction onto traditional revivalism without disturbing his Methodist heritage, offered a much less tame synthesis when he spoke on behalf of the Epworth League. In his address “Higher Intelligence and Consecration,” Burwash warned that “to divorce our religion from the advancing intelligence of the time, and make it depend on an emotional basis only, would be a fatal mistake.” However, Burwash did not offer a mere blending of old and new, rather he forcefully stated that “a high intellectual aim on the part of our young people is one of the most hopeful signs of the times. To this end thorough and systematic reading, or rather study, is absolutely necessary.”¹⁰²

The definition of what constituted evangelicalism was such contested terrain after the 1890s that its defenders had to make particular appeals to the past in order to integrate what were still deemed “radical” notions into the church. For example, one contributor to the *Christian Guardian* criticized the belief that

99 Ibid., Rev. Theo Parr, “Mental Pabulum or What to Read,” 5 May 1897. See, Ibid., 3:2, “Minutes,” 7 May 1910. One of the favourites of the reading courses was Rev. William Withrow’s *Barbara Heck*, whose theme concerned the conversion of a young man.

100 Ibid., Rev. G.A. Mitchell, “Duties,” 5 May 1897; “Overcoming Prejudice,” 19 February 1896.

101 Rev. D.E. Martin, “Christian Zeal,” *CEE* 1, no. 10 (October 1899): 295.

102 UCA, BRE, Box 7, “CG Clippings,” “Higher Intelligence and Consecration,” n.d. For Burwash as a moderate reformer within the church, see Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991); Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989).

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Methodism was deemed to be commensurate with evangelism, and that it must likewise be defined only by the revival and the class meeting. While the writer acknowledged the place of "aggressive evangelistic work" within Methodism, he maintained that the development of "intelligent Christian character" was just as important for the continued vitality of the church: "The preacher who leads his people to read and think is exemplifying the true spirit of Methodism, and is following in the footsteps of our illustrious founder, who was a reader and a thinker, as well as a revivalist."¹⁰³ Although Methodism had always been a religion both of the heart and the intellect,¹⁰⁴ it had conventionally been argued that too much education would in fact weaken zeal.¹⁰⁵ What was path-breaking about this new evangelical outlook is that while it hoped to construct an equipoise between the traditions of "soul-culture" and "brain culture," which lay at the foundation of Methodism, it called for a distinct overbalance in favour of the latter.¹⁰⁶ Even great evangelical preachers, such as S.E. Marshall of Barton Street Methodist in Hamilton, who had a classics degree in addition to theological training, recommended a combination of an "intelligent piety" and "an earnest piety," but with the caveat that the Epworth Reading Courses should become the centerpiece of religious practice, with only sporadic special sermons for the conversion of the unsaved.¹⁰⁷ In many respects the view of evangelism promulgated by the Epworth League, which posited that intellectual and spiritual growth could function harmoniously within Methodism,¹⁰⁸ was little more than political window-dressing. In truth, this new intelligent Christianity wrought fundamental change within Methodism: it not only sought to expunge experiential, heartfelt 'female' piety from the church, but it no longer deemed emotive piety a legitimate characteristic of Christian masculinity. League promoters recognized that men would not be attracted to the church if its message was too sentimental and believed that the church would relinquish its broader cultural authority if it remained the province of women. Female parishioners had become a distinct liability to those modernizers who wished to foster a new role for Methodism within the wider civic sphere. The debate over whether to reject the older Methodism of the heart or to cultivate a more intellectualized religion was one which turned on the gender politics of Methodism.

103 UCA, BRE, Box 7, "CG Clippings," 25 October 1897.

104 Gauvreau, *Evangelical Century*.

105 Goldwin French, "Methodism and Education in the Atlantic Provinces, 1800-1874," in Charles H.H. Scobie and J. Webster Grant, eds., *The Contribution of Methodism to Atlantic Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 158.

106 Miss Rose Wakefield, "Our League Reading Course," *CEE* 1, no. 10 (October 1899): 292.

107 UCA, BRE, Box 6, "Epworth Reading Course." For a more detailed study of Barton Street Methodist, Hamilton, see, Gauvreau, "Factories and Foreigners."

108 UCA, BRE, Box 6, A.C. Crews, Superintendent of the Epworth League, "Practical Plan for Epworth League Work."

Promulgators of the Epworth League movement and the new evangelism were in fact creating, for the first time, a distinctly gendered perspective on religion in which female zeal was counter-balanced by the “thoughtful Christianity”¹⁰⁹ of the men, for whom “facts are the fingers of God.”¹¹⁰ The route to Christian manhood lay in avoiding church meetings which were too emotional¹¹¹ and immersing oneself in the systematic study of the Bible. Historical theology was considered a troubling new departure, not simply because it applied a critical method to the Bible, but because it forged a new interpretation of how to become a pious Methodist by placing the priority on reason and the intellect, attributes which were distinctly masculine in character.

Because the Epworth League functioned as the primary forum for male-centred religiosity, it likewise became the primary vehicle by which the newer notions of social Christianity entered the Methodist Church. Its organ, the *Canadian Epworth Era*, consistently endorsed the views of Hugh Price Hughes, the English urban clergyman-reformer who inveighed against a self-absorbed and meditative form of piety, in favour of practical Christianity which penetrated into the marketplace and the state.¹¹² Here again, other-worldliness was *constructed* as a merely female trait, while practical social Christianity was deemed the purview of men. Although historians have sketched the broad outlines of how social Christianity dominated Protestantism after 1900, they have left unexplored the question of how such a new departure within Methodism was introduced and have largely ignored its gender-specific implications.¹¹³ At a time when church leaders were still debating whether Methodism should turn its back on its long-standing tradition of other-worldliness, which saw a distinct separation between the spiritual and the secular, the discourse of practical Christianity, which implied a more active role for its members in the field of social reform, had become well entrenched within the Epworth Leagues. Once again, the impetus behind reorienting the church into the wider civic sphere was impelled by the need to involve young men in “more active Christian work.”¹¹⁴ Under this new rubric the purpose of the revival was to train young people to reflect not simply upon their inner spiritual lives, but to consider also the outer life of the community; however, Christian charity was not only intended to help the poor, but it also aimed to teach courage, self-respect, self-reliance, and independence in the young benefactors.¹¹⁵ With these goals in mind, the Epworth

109 Rev. D.E. Martin, “Christian Zeal,” *CEE* 1, no. 10 (October 1899): 295.

110 “Words for Missionaries,” *CEE*, 1:2 (Feb. 1899), 12.

111 UCA, BRE, Box 7, “CG Clippings,” untitled, 2 September 1896.

112 Hugh Price Hughes, “Religious Self-Indulgence,” *CEE* 1, no. 3 (March 1899): 72.

113 Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*.

114 Archives of Ontario, Central Presbyterian Church, Session Minutes, 9 November 1880. This comment was made with reference to its Young Men’s Associations which were local precursors of the Epworth League.

115 Mrs Flagg, “Visiting and Relief,” *CEE* 2, no. 1 (January 1900): 17.

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League became involved in a wide range of social work, once the domain of the older women within the church. By the late 1890s Methodist young people were involved in a wide range of “practical benevolence”: they visited the sick, distributed reading material to the poor and men in the lumber camps, they found work for the unemployed, visited the county poorhouses and prisons, sang hymns at old age homes, and raised money for charity.¹¹⁶ Even the junior Leaguers who were under the age of sixteen were expected to develop a social consciousness through service to the needy. The boys were expected to chop wood for poor women and the girls either visited the sick or gathered clothing for the poor.¹¹⁷

Although such charitable activities involved both young men and women, the League, soon after its inception, took a significant turn towards a distinctly male-oriented concept of Christian service. This involved the reinterpretation of practical church work to include broader notions of public service, which encompassed an interest in “righteous government” and “righteousness in the nation.”¹¹⁸ To this end, reading courses were implemented the emphasis of which was upon the study of political economy, efficient government, and urban problems, and the Epworth meetings focused less as prayer meetings and more as business meetings in which young men were instructed on how to write reports, speak in public, and how to develop business ethics, skills which were intended to prepare young Christian men for a life of public service.¹¹⁹ At its inception the League focused largely on issues of public morality, such as temperance, smoking, and profanity; but soon young men were reading the work of the American sociologist Richard Ely and Benjamin Kidd’s *Social Evolution*, while topics for discussion ranged from Christian politics, Christian socialism, the social teachings of Jesus, to redemption of the slums, the modern industrial system, the social life of the city, and the struggling masses.¹²⁰ By 1911 the Epworth League had its own Department of Citizenship, which taught young men a new conception of the elision of the sacred and the secular and a new interrelationship of the individual, civic organizations, and the state, which expressed a progressive ‘new liberalism’.¹²¹ By 1914, the new notions of a virile Christian patriotism were imparted in special leadership classes, which

116 UCA, BRE, Box 7, “CG Clippings,” 27 April 1898.

117 “Junior Department,” *CEE* 1, no. 5 (May 1899): 136; “The Epworth League and Its Silver Jubilee,” *CEE* 16, no. 10 (October 1914); UCA, BRE, Box 7, “CG Clippings,” 27 January 1897, 13 April 1898.

118 “The Epworth League and Its Silver Jubilee.”

119 On this theme within working class churches, see Gauvreau, “Factories and Foreigners,” 260.

120 UCA, BRE, 3:2, “Canadian Epworth League Topics,” 1910, 1813; *Ibid*, 1:2, “Minutes,” 13 May 1896, 28 July 1897, 12 October 1898.

121 For a longer discussion of these ideas within the Protestant denominations, see Christie and Gauvreau, ‘*A Full-Orbed Christianity*’, 151-5.

were instituted for young boys in cooperation with the YMCA.¹²² Several articles appeared in the first few issues of the *Canadian Epworth Era* which offered a radical critique of laissez-faire political economy, the workings of the market, and the inequities of modern industrialization;¹²³ but these efforts to promote Christian socialism were soon pre-empted by a more moderate, progressive reformism, which linked civic consciousness and good citizenship with more orthodox concerns such as the purity of the home, integrity of commerce, and the stability of the state, all of which were shown to depend upon the increased spirituality of the church. What was being indicated through the discursive culture of the Epworth League was that patriotism and piety were interdependent so that one could not be a good (male) citizen without being a good Christian.¹²⁴

It is clear that the League's Department of Citizenship functioned as the testing-ground for the new principles of social Christianity which came to so dominate the Methodist Church just prior to 1914. In fact, one of the reasons for the slow demise of the Epworth movement may have been that its goal of reconstructing Methodism towards a greater emphasis upon "the Gospel of a regenerated world"¹²⁵ had been successful and had found a more mainstream site for its espousal, namely the new Department of Evangelism and Social Service. Those ministers who later came to dominate the progressive wing of Methodism, namely T. Albert Moore, Hugh Dobson, and Ernest Thomas, all came to prominence in the Epworth League.¹²⁶ In transforming Methodist piety away from a concern with inner spirituality to a new conception of conversion, which might also embrace the social uplift of humanity, these young ministers were likewise constructing a more "virile" religious culture. The Epworth League was in fact the Trojan horse for Methodist progressives, for while modern notions of social evangelism continued to be debated within Methodism's central organ, *The Christian Guardian*, several innovations were introduced by stealth within the young people's societies: it altered the age specificity of conversion and transformed the experience into one of peer sociability rather than one controlled by the church elders; it interrupted the traditional connection between the family and church expansion and redefined church membership as a more individualistic experience; it was a vehicle for introducing the scientific notions of biblical exegesis and ideals of social Christianity;

122 UCA, BRE, 1:2, "Minutes," 8 July 1914.

123 See, for example, Rev. Sutherland, "The Craze for Bargains"; Rev. Sprague, "Socialism from Genesis to Revelation," *CEE* 1, no. 1 (January 1899): 29. The latter argued for greater state intervention to control property and thereby reduce class conflict.

124 UCA, BRE, Box 7, "CG Clippings," 11 August 1897.

125 J.E. Rattenbury, "The Need of the Age," *CEE* 12, no. 9 (September 1910).

126 S.D. Chown, "A Call to Worthy Citizenship," *CEE* 13, no. 1 (January 1911); UCA, BRE, 1:2, "Minutes," 5 April 1911, 14 September 1912.

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its literature department transformed the oral focus of Methodism into a reading culture; it redefined evangelism away from the core groups of Methodism to embrace strangers within the community; but, most important of all, the Epworth League was expected to be a pivotal site for the ‘remasculinization’ of Methodism. Its central purpose was to so equate the new social evangelism with Christian manliness that, as the Rev. G. Bishop of Brampton explained, “the Young Men of Methodism for Christ”¹²⁷ would become the rallying call of the new refurbished Methodist Church.

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NANCY CHRISTIE (Trent University) is the author of two prize-winning monographs, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada 1900-1940* and *Engendering the State: Family, Work and Welfare in Canada*. She has edited several collected works on family, religion, and postwar Canada, the latest of which is entitled *Transatlantic Subjects: Ideas, Institutions and Social Experience in Post-Revolutionary British North America*.

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127 Rev. G. Bishop, Brampton, “Have Expectations Been Met?,” *CEE* 1, no. 5 (May 1899): 136.