Profile

JAMES M. SHAVER: A Two-Talent Man

by Peter Douglas

“Damned cattle”, the brakeman called the Ukranian immigrants in the crowded railway coaches, and the bystanders agreed. Merchants bragged of how they had over-charged and under-changed these poor peasants, bilking them out of their meagre bits of money. Jim Shaver, a young Methodist probationer on his first posting in Agnes, Quebec, a railway division town, was filled with an anger that never left him. Whether it was an issue of fair elections, or registration of Ukrainians as Austrians and their consequent internment, or access to education, or access to worship, or labour struggles, Jim Shaver would always be on the side of his immigrant people. Never again would he stand by and let them be cheated.

To carry out his calling, he had to be better equipped. He returned to university, taking Arts in Kingston and Theology in Toronto. In 1910 he graduated from Victoria University, and moved with his new wife into a house that was to be known as the University Settlement. Downstairs there were four rooms that were public rooms for meetings and community service, while the upstairs provided living quarters for the Shavers and two students who worked with them on the project. This experience rounded out the training necessary for the mission work that was to be Jim Shaver’s life. To his passion he added skills in community development, working at practical solutions to practical problems. If alcohol consumption was at the root of many people’s difficulty, then how could he cut down on that consumption? One answer was temperance and prohibition, and there were times when Shaver worked for those ends. But in the short term, there were simpler solutions. Part of the reason people frequented the saloons of Toronto was that there was no other place to sit and visit. People drank beer because it was the only beverage available. They went into the bar because it had the only available toilets. Shaver lobbied city hall for sitting rooms, water fountains and public toilets; and he saw some small change in the community in which he worked. He was never one to blame the victim, to see the drunkard as a moral degenerate, or to see the poor as lazy. He looked for causes behind the symptom and tried to make changes there.

Writing a report for the University Monthly, Shaver quoted approvingly a book by a Jane Addams: A settlement (such as the one Jim Shaver was already directing)
must be grounded in a philosophy whose foundation is on the solidarity of the human race, a philosophy which will not waver when the race happens to be represented by a drunken woman or an idiot boy. The residents [of the settlement] are bound to see the needs of their neighbourhood as a whole, to furnish data for legislation, and to use their influence to secure it. In short, they are pledged to devote themselves to the duties of good citizenship and to the arousing of the social energies which too largely lie dormant in every neighbourhood given over to industrialization.

During the one year that Jim Shaver organized the University Settlement, he set up athletic programs, medical and dental clinics, a free dispensary and began English classes. Obviously, he did not do all those things himself. What he was learning, and it was equally important with program organization, was how to recruit and work with volunteers. Because the University Settlement was a university project, his volunteers were students.

Knowing how to work with volunteers was an important skill he brought with him into his later work, from 1921 on, in Winnipeg at All Peoples’ Mission. In 1927, he was able to report that there were seventy-five volunteers working in the Mission, and to say with some pride that one-third were the product of the Mission itself. The remaining two-thirds came from churches in all parts of the city and from the Student Christian Movement (SCM) of the United Colleges (now the University of Winnipeg). Maintaining a balance and perspective in the work done by volunteers was part of what Jim Shaver gave to the people who worked with him in the missions. He set as a goal one year, “to try at all times to see that each worker has a task in which all of his or her individuality can express itself unhampered and unafraid”. Then, in another year, he had “to try at all times to make the load light enough so that these men and women will not over tax their strength, as folk of their love and zeal are wont to do”. People who remember their days as volunteers with Jim Shaver remember the impact he had upon them, the sense of mission he exuded. He attempted always to live his life normally and without self-conscious effort in fellow-
ship with God, confident that Christ directed his life. Professor G. B. King, speaking in 1936, told of a time when Shaver was giving a talk at an SCM camp. After the talk, some of the students commented to King: “We might have attempted an answer to some of his arguments — before his life, we had nothing to say.”

There is a consistency to that theme in the life of Dr. Jim Shaver. His life was the message, and the message was Christ. He was an evangelical, a man committed to personal salvation. That was his focus from the beginning to the end of his life. Looking back on that life from an age of about forty-five years, he said that the first really hard thing he ever had to do, while still living in his parents’ home, was to talk to his two unconverted brothers and bring them to Christ. To his amazement, they listened; and he had discovered the way in which he would do his work. “Perhaps this was just a hint at the fact that 90% of the decisions made through my ministry were made as the result of personal work”, he wrote. At the end of his ministry, this was still the most important focus. In his letter of resignation, written to the Board of Institutional Missions in 1940, he said:

If I might presume to make a suggestion as to my successor, I wish to say that the work has been growing along the lines of personal evangelism... One who is gifted in this line of work could do much to build up a strong cause in a few years.

The methodology was personal evangelism, the content was Christ; but the goal was a changed world. The Creed of All Peoples’ Mission while Jim Shaver was there was:

WE BELIEVE that Jesus has the solution of all life’s problems, personal and social.
WE BELIEVE that all who take upon themselves His ideal will experience His personal presence with them as they go about to carry out the programme which is His and ought to be ours.
WE BELIEVE that it is our business to get that experience over to the hundreds of young people who come to us, and, through them, to the people of their own race in their own neighbourhood and in Canada and to all races unto the uttermost parts of the earth.

All of these streams came together in the single personality that was Jim Shaver. There was the evangelical commitment and loyalty to the Church that he learned from his parents in rural Ontario. There was the passion for justice that he discovered in Agnes, Quebec, as he saw immigrants being degraded and cheated. There was the ability to research and organize that he learned in the University Settlement of Toronto. Finally, there was that divine spark that is the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the quality that gave him authority as a man of God to all who knew him.

This was the Jim Shaver who entered into an urban ministry that was to span thirty years. In 1911 Dr. S.D. Chown, who was then General Secretary for Home Missions in the Methodist Church, wanted to take Shaver out of the University Settlement in Toronto and send him to Fort William (now Thunder Bay, Ontario). If that was where God was leading, then Shaver was willing to go. Less willing was Montreal Conference of the Methodist Church. There was the compulsory rural experience for newly ordained clergy to be completed first, so it was not until 1912 that Jim Shaver got his first mission among the Ukrainians.

Fort William, at that time, had a population of about 20,000 people, 7,000 of whom were non-English speaking. A couple of years earlier, there had been strikes and riots in the city, pointing up the primitive living conditions of the people. In a survey of a typical block in the immigrant area, there were 238 people living in 35 buildings. The average number of occupants per room for sleeping was 4.5. There were no bathtubs, no toilets, no closets, and very inadequate garbage removal. These were the people of Jim Shaver’s parish; Ukrainians, Slovacks, Russians, Poles, Austrians and Italians.

The first thing Shaver did was to start English classes. Without knowing the common language there would be little progress. He got hold of an old pool room and set up a hundred chairs. Before long a little group of men gathered outside on the street, curious about what was going on. They spoke a language Shaver could not understand. Eventually, one of them asked in broken English:


“How the hell are you going to teach English if you don’t know another language?”

It was a good question, but Shaver had learned a technique of dramatic teaching while he was in Toronto. So he brought the men in and sat them down. Then, with much leaping about, and miming such words as sleep, awake, open and close, and much repetition,
the men began to speak their first English words. “By God, he can do it!” exclaimed the man who had first questioned him, and he was on his way.

During the next nine years a thousand men gained a working knowledge through the classes Jim Shaver organized. They learned the language, and they also learned life skills and in particular, civics. They learned that a ballot was a secret thing, something that could not be bought and sold. They learned how to apply for jobs. For letter writing practice they wrote letters to the Editor, writing on whatever matters concerned them and their community.

During the First World War the Canadian government wanted to require all Ukrainians to register as Austrians, making them susceptible to internment as enemy aliens. Jim Shaver was one of the people who came to their defence. He was there to explain the history of their oppression, an oppression that made them natural enemies of the Austrian cause. The proposed action by Canada would be a gross injustice. For such support he earned the affection and loyalty of many Ukrainian Canadians. One man wrote:

Really I fail to find sufficient words to express my gratitude to you for the excellent and unprejudiced mode in which you handled the subject. . . . We Ukrainians have so few friends in this country that one gets astonished in discovering one like your good self, sir.

That letter came from Vegreville, Alberta. Another letter came from Duluth, Minnesota, from a former student of the English classes, writing to tell Jim Shaver that he was getting married. He wrote:

Funny enough, the first sight of you I got created sympathy for you, which ever since only increased. You are good man and I wish there were more men like you, it would be a real blessing for the country. If I had the power I would make you minister president and I bet, I should not be mistaken, then Canada would have mild but d— firm hand to guide her affairs.

There was something about this slim man with the piercing eyes, this man who could not speak the language of the immigrants; there was something about him that was recognized as immediately trustworthy. It was a trust that was not misplaced, because Jim Shaver truly loved the Ukrainian people who made up his congregation. He loved them individually, and was firmly convinced that they would bring with them qualities of life that would help make Canada a different and even better country than the British colony that was its beginning.

When he moved to Winnipeg in 1921 he took up the position of Superintendent of All Peoples’ Mission which consisted of Stella Mission, Sutherland Mission, and for a short time, MacLean Mission. This was a more organized situation than Fort William, as All Peoples’ had a history that could be traced back to 1889 and a Sunday School class organized by a Molly McGuire. It was a mission with kindergarten classes, boys’ workers and girls’ workers, and already existing buildings. Unfortunately, all of those assets were sometimes a burden. There were people involved with the mission who had their loyalty to people and programs that preceded Shaver. Some of those may have initially hoped he would fail, but failure was not his style.

He began to organize. He organized sports leagues and took great pride in the achievements of his boys and girls. He genuinely believed that what they learned on the sports field would stick with them throughout their lives. There is a story of a baseball team from the mission, playing in the city finals against Norwood United Church. The team from All Peoples was winning in the final inning. The opposing team was at bat with two men out. The count was three balls, two strikes against the batter. A near accident up in the stands momentarily distracted the umpire. The All Peoples pitcher threw a sizzler across the plate, but the Norwood batter tipped it. The umpire called a strike. The batter was out, and the game had been won by All Peoples. It was the catcher from the mission who insisted that the batter had tipped the ball, and the game would have to go on until it could be won properly. That Norwood batter hit a double on the next pitch but was left on base by the next batter, and the Mission won — in more ways than one. Those standards were learned from Jim Shaver.

It was that kind of integrity that gave Jim Shaver his moral authority throughout the Northend of Winnipeg. He could enter hundreds of homes in the midst of a family dispute, lay down the law, and expect to be listened to. These people were his family. He wasn’t interfering where he did not belong. This was his place.

That is why he was deeply hurt when the United Church questioned, and ultimately failed to support, one of his most creative projects. Beginning in 1925, the year the United Church came into being, he initiated an outreach program beyond the bounds of Winnipeg’s Northend. As difficult as conditions were in the city, they
were worse in the rural Ukrainian communities. Therefore, in 1925, Shaver borrowed enough money to buy tents and pay expenses for two young men from the mission, Art Hay and Peter Dobush, to spend the summer in a community north of the city. They were to conduct recreation programs, teach English, teach civics, conduct Sunday School classes and carry on evangelical work. The next year they went back and the year after; but funding was difficult. In 1926, Shaver wrote to a friend, “I drained my savings of the last $135. There is a hole in the elbow of my last suit and my superannuation is over due, but I am sure all will be well until someone helps me with the $135.” By 1929, there were seven young men ready to go as missionaries from All Peoples’ but they needed support from the Board of Home Missions. Although they were all Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, total abstainers from alcohol and tobacco, had served previously on mission fields, and had participated in weekly training sessions, the Board of Home Missions turned the project down. These seven young men were all products of a “mission”, not a “congregation”. They were not members of the United Church of Canada.

All that Jim Shaver had been doing for twenty years was called into question. The Creed of the Mission had said:

WE BELIEVE that it is our business to get that experience [of the personal presence of Christ] over to the hundreds of young people who come to us, and, through them, to the people of their own race in their own neighbourhood and in Canada and to all races to the uttermost parts of the earth.

If the United Church was saying that young people who grew up in the Mission were unfit to spread the Gospel, then the work had no focus and no purpose. He wrote:

The spirit of my young people from R.C. and Grk. Cath. homes as they take up the work of promoting the Kingdom is beautiful. I get riled at the critical self-complacent world once in a while and feel like knocking some “into a grease spot”, but that isn’t Christian and wouldn’t get anywhere so I just sit down and read John. That’s better. Of course I’ve always been unorthodox in spots but then a fellow has to venture on this job and run risks once in a while or he’d never get anywhere, and he ought to expect a few bawlings out by the “umpire”. But I want to tell you religious umpires are rather trying to youngsters who have come out of the military platoon of R. Catholicism and are new to the game of the free combination play of Protestantism. It isn’t easy to keep on being the go-between. A fellow learns the truth of the modern saying “Peace must be made, not declared”.

Shaver’s response to that rebuff on the part of the Board of Home Missions was to tighten up the ties between the Mission and the United Church as a confessional church. He had a worship centre built into the mission buildings and began to gather a regularly worshipping congregation. People were baptized and confirmed, and welcomed into membership in the United Church of Canada. There was a change made in the youth programs. Girls who wanted to be members of CGIT (Canadian Girls In Training) were required to be in attendance at Sunday School. The work of the mission still thrived, but it was changed. It became more traditional and less experimental.

Some of that change was greeted gladly by Jim Shaver because he was a man who appreciated seeing the Gospel presented in sermon and hymns. He had grown up in the revival meetings of Ontario, and enjoyed the opportunity to preach. What grated on him, however, was the inability of the church to see that the Gospel was also communicated in other ways: through Bible study at a riverbank camp, in the spirit of a Mission baseball team, in the conversation over a craft project for a CGIT group.

During the twenty years that Jim Shaver served as superintendent of All Peoples’ Mission, he had seen the population of the city increase by over 40,000 people, but the number of foreign-born people had in fact decreased. His Ukrainians were no longer immigrants; they were second-generation Canadians. They were no longer ready to go as missionaries from All Peoples with the hope of starting a “congregation”. They were no longer products of a “mission” but members of the United Church of Canada.

The spirit of my young people from R.C. and Grk. Cath. homes was enriched with Christian piety and Social Gospel passion. Those gifts that came from the heart and soul of an urban missionary. Jesus told a parable about a ruler who went on a journey, giving to his servants responsibility for his property; “to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability” (Matt. 25: 14). Jim Shaver was the man who received two talents. He was not the multi-facetted, highly-gifted man who occupied a great pulpit and organized nation-wide, or even city-wide, movements. He was a simple man who loved his Lord and loved the people who had been given into his care. There was never any doubt where he stood. Among the people who worked in Home Missions was to tighten up the ties between the Mission and the United Church as a confessional church. He had a worship centre built into the mission buildings and began to gather a regularly worshipping congregation. People were baptized and confirmed, and welcomed into membership in the United Church of Canada. There was a change made in the youth programs. Girls who wanted to be members of CGIT (Canadian Girls In Training) were required to be in attendance at Sunday School. The work of the mission still thrived, but it was changed. It became more traditional and less experimental.

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Missions across Canada, he was a hero. Among the people of his parish, whether they were United Church or not, he was an object of love. At a time, late in his life, when Jim Shaver was in ill-health and in need of blood-transfusions, there was a line of young men at the hospital, ready to donate their blood. They were young men of the Mission, members of baseball teams, members of Sunday School classes; Ukrainian, Polish, German, Icelandic ... ready to give back the blood that Jim Shaver had poured out for their sakes over thirty years of ministry. Surely, he was greeted by his Lord with the words: “Well done, good and faithful servant. . . .”

Editor’s Note:

Jim Shaver and his wife, Elizabeth, had two sons, Bill and Jack, who were ordained in Manitoba Conference in 1935 and 1942 respectively.

Review Article

FRAGMENTED GODS: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada


Reginald Bibby’s recent study of religion in Canada has been receiving considerable attention in ecclesiastical circles. There are some good reasons why it should. It raises again the important issue of the relationship between Christian faith and contemporary culture. It documents, indirectly but poignantly, one course which we are tempted to take in dealing with that issue. And it illustrates clearly both the poverty and the hypnotic allure of an inadequately grounded set of social scientific techniques.

If we were to accept the assumption that social science deals with “facts” while theological reflection deals with “values”, and that these two are neatly separable, we could review Bibby’s book without attending to the inadequacy of his science. However, since theology and science converge on questions of truth, we are compelled to reflect on both aspects of Bibby, his science and his theology. As we shall see, the theological and scientific shortcomings of his book are related.

Fragmented Gods contains both an analysis of what is wrong with Canadian religion and a prescription for curing its ills. The analysis purports to be based on the results of Bibby’s surveys. A careful reading of the book will show that there is no logical or persuasive connection between them. His analysis may not be wrong; indeed I consider it to be true enough to warrant serious response, but it is not based on his statistical data.

Anecdotes and Generalizations

I see this book as the effort of a young and gifted scholar to integrate at least three elements in his life: his allegiance to the evangelical, pietistic Protestantism in which he was raised and began a formal theological education; his appreciation for the humanistic ideals which pervade our culture as ideals — self-affirmation, tolerance, compassion — and which mitigate some of the effects of our culture’s darker side; his attraction to the powers of technolog-