

“Wherever the Twos or Threes are Gathered”: Personal Conversion and the Construction of Community in Outport Newfoundland Methodism

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On a typical Sunday night in the 1940s at Lumsden North, a small outport¹ clinging to a sandy shore in eastern Newfoundland, Uncle Eli would stand in his pew in the wood-frame United Church, and give his after service² testimony: “Wherever the twos or threes are gathered together, there am I in the midst and that’s a blessing.” He would continue, “We need no amount of high words to tell thee who we are and what we are, but we come to thee in all of our unworthiness.”³

This mixture of scripture citation, praise, and prayer of humble access was not unusual in form, but its content was particular to Eli himself, so particular that at least one of the young people who heard him repeat it Sunday after Sunday could recall it verbatim fifty years later. Eli’s participation in the after service connected him to nearly two centuries of Methodist religious history in Newfoundland, for although his congregation had become part of The United Church of Canada in 1925, most of its Methodist practices and theology remained intact. Methodism had come early to Newfoundland, in 1766, and spread prodigiously during the mid-to-late 1800s, claiming, at its peak in 1921, 28% of the colony’s population, with Roman Catholics and Anglicans dividing most of the rest of the population evenly between them.⁴

The success of Methodism in colonial Newfoundland can be attributed to several obvious factors: the zealous sending of missionaries

into every far-flung bay, while the Church of England and its Society for the Propagation of the Gospel dragged its heels; the Methodist practice of planting schools as well as churches in small communities, with the appointed schoolmaster often serving as both teacher and preacher; the employment of young, unmarried, male probationers, who were free to journey from settlement to settlement, visiting and conducting services; and the migration of families from one cove to another in the pursuit of better fishing grounds, carrying with them their portable and resilient Methodist faith.⁵

Less obvious, but as significant, is the role played by the theology that Newfoundland Methodists learned and adapted for their impoverished and isolated lives. This faith focused squarely, almost exclusively, upon personal conversion. Nearly every Methodist discipline, from public worship to the class meeting, the love feast,⁶ and family prayer, reshaped itself on Newfoundland soil to become yet another opportunity for dramatic personal conversion and testimony to its effects. Allegations, however, that Newfoundland Methodism abandoned theology altogether for an orgy of emotion⁷ lose their force when these religious practices are scrutinized more carefully. This task can be an especially fruitful one to undertake, for alongside the usual archival evidence, there are many living witnesses who experienced this piety in its heyday, and there are significant numbers of Newfoundlanders, across several denominations, who still claim adherence to its conversion-oriented religious practices, naming their heritage as “old-time Methodism.”⁸ Through the archival sources, written surveys, and interviews with Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, I discovered that this piety, summarized by Ernst Troeltsch as a highly individualistic orthodoxy,⁹ in fact acted also in a more subversive role: it helped to create and sustain communities in a region that had been kept conveniently poor and under-serviced by colonial governments and wealthy fish merchants.¹⁰ Newfoundland Methodism forged a deep intertwining of personal salvation and community identity, a connection which gave shape and strength to both individuals and the outports in which they lived and worked.

In this paper, I will suggest three ways in which this emphasis on personal conversion contributed to the construction and strengthening of community life in rural Newfoundland, through invitation, affirmation, and integration of individuals into the life and work of the community. I will conclude by offering some reasons for the eventual weakening of this

powerful link between “conversion” and “community.”

1. Invitation to a Romance

When Laurence Coughlan, a colourful and controversial Irish-born missionary of the 1760s, and one of the first to proclaim a conversion-centred theology in Newfoundland, thundered to congregations in Conception Bay: “You fishermen, you Newfoundland fishermen, I tell you, if you repent not, your sins will sink you into hell,”¹¹ the “Joys of the Children of God on one hand, and Cries of broken-hearted sinners on the other,” were, by Coughlan’s own admission, “very alarming.”¹² Many fishing folk and a few of the merchant class, particularly women, dealt with their alarm by flocking to Coughlan’s noisy services to “groan for redemption.”¹³

Although Coughlan was eventually ejected from Newfoundland at the behest of the merchant elite, his invitation lingered, the invitation to view spiritual life not as a resigned acquiescence to duty, suffering, and fate, but rather as a “romance,” a narrative category described by literary critic Northrop Frye as a “quest: the perilous journey, the crucial struggle, and the exaltation of the hero.”¹⁴ Translated into religious terms by pastoral theologian James Hopewell, this quest becomes a journey away from weakness and sin, through the “peril of evil forces and events,” to the experience of the “liquid love of God” pouring through one’s being.¹⁵

As in other quest epics, the conversion adventure requires both individual autonomy and a strong cast of characters to assist or thwart the hero along the journey. The outpost became the stage upon which the salvation drama would unfold, and Methodism set the scene. The whole of Sunday was set apart for things holy, as Methodists took Sabbatarianism to new heights,¹⁶ donned the best clothes they could muster, and enacted a day-long religious gathering. It began with a preacher-centred morning worship, the centrepiece of which was a long sermon, usually focusing on misbehaviour in the community, the horrors of hell and the need for redemption. Poet E.J. Pratt, who grew up in a Newfoundland Methodist manse, describes the preaching as he encountered it:

[It was] capable of lifting the congregation out of their pews by the most gorgeous descriptions of heaven, or else shake them under the planks by painting hell with colours never seen on land or sea . . . We

would creep under our seats until the time came for the benediction. We could come out from our hiding when we were sure the colours were dry. One might dispute the gospel truth of the message, but no one could deny the power. It was real heaven and real hell we saw.¹⁷

The rest of the day continued the theme, through Sunday School, perhaps a love feast, and more preaching services, until finally, after the “night service,” came the after service, with its extemporaneous prayer and testimony, its chorus-singing, and its altar call and direct invitation to conversion. The preaching, the praying, the singing, and the pleading over the course of the day had created an atmosphere where anything could happen. An 1895 report from Shoal Harbour noted, “One man only got as far as the door when he fell down on the snow crying out, ‘Lord save me, Lord save me.’ We carried him back inside the church, where the Lord saved him and saves him still.”¹⁸ A worshipper at Blackhead in the early 1900s was so overcome that he jumped from the church gallery to the main floor in his desire to get to the rail.¹⁹ Falling to one’s knees, usually at the chancel rail, was the first step in conversion. Some, especially teenagers, went forward with a group of their peers. Others knelt quietly at the rail after deep personal reflection.²⁰ One woman recalls her father’s conversion in the 1930s:

There had been a revival at the church, with several people converted, but my father wasn’t one of them. About a quarter to twelve in the night, one of my father’s friends came banging at the door: “Art,” he said, “they’re having a revival down to the church. I got converted, and now I come for you.”

Pop jumped out of bed and pulled on his pants. My mother called out after him, “Art, don’t be so foolish!” She always had a bit of Anglican in her.²¹

However they arrived there, the converts shared one desire: to become the central character in a story fraught with possibility and peril, one that symbolized and echoed the daily struggle to scrape a living from the sea: the quest for the salvation of their own souls. At the same time, by their very choices to resist or to respond, to weep or to wait, each worshipper was also playing a supporting role in another’s quest, thus joining more tightly the bonds of blood and shared labour which already

linked outport neighbours. A woman born in 1898, who became one of the United Church's first female lay readers in Newfoundland, perhaps sums it up best: "You enjoyed the service, and you was there in the church to worship God, and you'd think, I wants more than *this*, anyway. I wants part of *that*."²²

2. Affirmation of Individual and Collective Identity

Whether persons had walked thoughtfully to the rail, or jumped from the gallery, they were not deemed "converted" until they had sensed that they had moved from "this" to "that," or, as one nineteenth-century missionary put it, "the Lord answered them."²³ They indicated that they had received their answer by some public signal. It sometimes took more than one trip to the rail before persons were convinced of their conversion; as one man recalls, "They'd say, he's down, but he's not saved yet."²⁴ The sign might be as slight as a wave of the hand, or as dramatic as dancing a "joy-jig,"²⁵ leaping over pews or pulling down the church chandelier.²⁶ This demonstration was to be followed, no later than the next week, by the convert standing in his or her pew to testify. A failure to testify nullified the whole experience. As one woman, whose father was converted while alone in the woods puts it, "He knew if he didn't acknowledge it publicly, it wouldn't be any good to him."²⁷

By this first testimony, the convert formally affirmed and claimed not only a personal worth, but also a public role, one of spiritual vigilance and proclamation. This identity carried with it remarkable social weight; while it did not overturn the class system, it certainly helped to loosen the colonial link between economic power and moral authority. Regardless of gender, economic status, or level of literacy, anyone could, by conversion and good living, become a model Christian. The key was to continue to live a saved life (to be discussed more fully below) to attend worship, the class-meeting, and other mid-week ordinances, and to testify and pray aloud regularly.

The testimony became the convert's faith signature. The reticent would choose as their testimony a passage of Scripture or the verse of a hymn which they would deliver as quickly and unobtrusively as possible; others developed a more elaborate set of phrases, which they also generally memorized and repeated with only slight modification each time they stood to speak. Testifiers further developed their own style by changing the tone

and cadence of their voices, adding an “ah” to their words (“I come to thee-ah, this evening-ah, as needy as ever-ah”),²⁸ or speaking abnormally loudly. One woman recalls a generally quiet man who, when testifying, would “roar, he’d talk so loud. When people got outside, they’d say, ‘Does he think God is deaf, I wonder?’”²⁹

If a testifier spoke too long, someone would start to sing a chorus, which the congregation would join, drowning out the testifier’s voice. This technique was called, “singing them down.”³⁰ The content of testimony was to be positive, announcing the good work the Lord had enacted in the life of the convert, with negativity saved for pointing out the sinfulness of the unsaved. It was not the place for confession – except to contrast pre-conversion behaviour with current practice – or for the expression of doubts or questions. It was especially important to older men and women,³¹ and may have been one of the ways the elderly continued to be useful when they could no longer offer the heavy physical labour so essential for survival in the outports. Says one woman, “It was the old people’s *work*.”³²

Whatever their ages, like the invitation that brought them to conversion, the converts’ affirmations, by public testimony of their identity and status, provided both personal and community benefits, allowing individuals to find their usefulness, empowering those who would otherwise remain marginal and voiceless, and helping the community in turn to name for itself, week by week, its vision of the redeemed life.

3. Integration of Self and Community: Behaving and Backsliding

If public testimony was the *seal*, the ongoing *sign* of conversion was revealed in the convert’s public behaviour. The convert’s behaviour in the world beyond the worship setting offered yet another way in which both the individual’s spiritual status and the community’s vitality were linked. Along with attendance at worship and the other “means of grace” (not including Holy Communion, of which only the worthiest of Christians were expected to partake), Newfoundland Methodists faced the usual set of sanctions against Sunday work, card-playing, swearing, alcohol, dancing and theatre. The rules about smoking were more vague, and there were no expectations that converts would act with any particular kindness toward their neighbours.³³

Because most outport communities lacked dance halls, liquor outlets, or theatres, Methodist right-living was possible to attain, with a little self-

discipline. The behaviour code in turn helped to maintain social order in settlements which for centuries lacked any formal law enforcement agencies or personnel. Even the injunction against card-playing had its merits. Women were only too happy to have their homes free of noisy, dirty-booted card-playing men who, in their games, blocked access to the oil lamp by which the evening's essential darning and mending would be done.³⁴

While the well-behaved convert contributed to community harmony, the backslider also played a significant role. An enduring theme in Newfoundland Methodism was spring and summer backsliding. The harsh and bloody demands of the spring seal hunt³⁵ and then the summer fishery, especially for those who went "down on the Labrador" meant that every fall there was a sad tally made of the many converted who had fallen away.³⁶ Others, who had been converted in the heat of a revival, back-slid soon after.³⁷ What had the backsliders done? Many had simply failed to keep up their church attendance or to continue to testify. Others felt they had done something wrong, especially by swearing.³⁸ Then there were those who simply relished the opportunity to participate in the conversion drama, including one old man who would get converted every year, "and they used to joke that if we're ever going to get him saved and get [him] to heaven, we'll have to shoot him after he gets converted next time."³⁹

The possibility of re-conversion offered the community a way to regroup after a summer spent fishing in far-flung coves. It afforded a reason to hold great winter or early spring revival meetings, times of intense spiritual fervor which saw some of Methodism's noisiest conversions, as reflected in this boyhood memory from the early 1900s:

I've seen revival services where the people got, as they say, the glory . . . [so] that you'd see hats and bonnets flying. They'd be jumping around. I remember one occasion I went to one of these revival services with my grandmother. They got happy, and the muffs and bonnets were flying around, and I got scared and she had to take me home.⁴⁰

Times of re-conversion allowed individuals to regain their spiritual equilibrium, and provided a ritual by which to bring the community back into relationship. The sense that a winter revival had engendered great numbers of converts gave the impression that the faith community was

thriving and growing, even if the gains served mostly to offset seasonal losses. Official Methodism was occasionally embarrassed by the seasonal ebb and flow,⁴¹ but were at pains to reverse the practice, so well did it serve both personal and community needs.

Conclusion

Tenacious as conversion theology has been in Newfoundland, its ability to link person and community through invitation, affirmation, and integration has weakened over the past century, and especially in the past five decades. This latter shift coincides with Newfoundland's experience of Confederation, the resettlement and consolidation of outport communities, the building of roads and highways, power grids and water and sewage systems, the creation of a university, and an increase in the provision of social and health services. These changes have created a new, more educated and widely-travelled society in outport communities.

Under these conditions, the invitation to a perilous romance is no longer as compelling, or as evocative of daily life. In a culture which has ceased to be predominantly oral, individuals and communities have a range of ways, beyond the weekly after service to affirm their identities, from professional careers to Internet chat rooms. New and complex law enforcement and employment patterns have replaced the seasonal rhythms which harmonized so well with Methodist behaviour codes and re-conversion. However, recent dramatic socio-economic changes, precipitated by the depletion of the Newfoundland cod stock, is pressing outport individuals and communities to seek to redefine themselves. And that intertwined longing for both personal salvation and community solidarity, so well represented in Uncle Eli's testimony exalting those times and places "where the twos and threes are gathered," has not disappeared. It continues to stir in the hearts and minds of the heirs of Newfoundland Methodism, and may yet lead them upon another spiritual adventure.

Endnotes

1. An "outport" is a Newfoundland fishing village, a "coastal settlement other than the chief port of St. John's," defined by G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, and J.D.A. Widdowson, eds. *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

2. The “after service” is a time of prayer, testimony and chorus-singing, led by either minister or lay-leader, immediately following the evening service. It will be discussed further below.
3. Wilf Norman, interview by author, 6 October 1991, Lumsden NF. Tape recording #9.
4. *Census Information: Newfoundland and Labrador*, 1981, Table A-5, 9; Statistics Canada (1991), Catalogue no. 93-319-XBP.
5. “If the Anglicans had been able to supply all the areas of Newfoundland that needed ministers, Methodism would not have spread as much as it did. The poor old bishop poured out his soul; he said, ‘If we don’t get more ministers, they’ll all be Roman Catholics and Methodists.’” Interview by author with Newfoundland church historian Naboth Winsor (7 October 1991, Wesleyville NF, tape recording #10A). See also reports of Methodist encroachment in the journal of Anglican missionary Julian Moreton, *Life and Work in Newfoundland*, ed. Naboth Winsor (Newtown NF, published by the editor, 1977), 24 June, 1857. For the spread of Methodist schools, see Llewellyn Parsons, “Newfoundland’s Struggle to Develop a System of Education” Tms, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1964, 11.
6. A “love feast” is a spiritual celebration, borrowed by John Wesley from the Moravians, featuring a sharing of bread and water, followed by a period of testifying (see Richard O. Johnson, “The Development of the Love Feast in Early American Methodism,” *Methodist History* 19 [1981]: 70).
7. Arthur Kewley, “The Influence of Isolation on the Theology of Methodism in Newfoundland 1874-1924” (Tms, photocopy of paper presented to the Canadian Society of Church History, May 29, 1971), 11.
8. “We have all heard the Honourable J.R. Smallwood [Newfoundland’s first provincial premier] declare publicly and with great vehemence, “I am the only Wesleyan left in Newfoundland” (see Arthur Kewley, “The First Fifty Years of Methodism in Newfoundland 1765-1815: Was it Authentic Wesleyanism?” *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 19 [March-June 1977]: 7). An example of a Methodist convert to Pentecostalism is Eugene Vaters, who cited as his reason for changing denominations his desire to conserve “basic Wesleyan teaching” (see Eugene Vaters, *Reminiscence* [St. John’s: Good Tidings Press, 1983], 40-41).
9. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: MacMillan, 1931), 2:721.

10. Permanent settlement by Europeans in Newfoundland began in the early 1600s. However, there were no resident civil or criminal courts in Newfoundland until the 1790s; the first resident governor arrived in 1818, and full colonial status, with Responsible Government, was not established until 1855. There were no local governments or authorities, in some cases until the mid-twentieth century. The fishery evolved into a family-centred barter enterprises, kept continually beholden to merchants (usually St. John's-based) who paid them for their summer's catch with a winter's supply of dry goods, flour, and sugar (see David Alexander, "Newfoundland's Traditional Economy and Development to 1934," in *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation*, eds. James Hiller and Peter Neary [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980], 17-63).
11. William Wilson, *Newfoundland and its Missionaries* (Cambridge: Dakin and Mecalf, 1866), 139.
12. Laurence Coughlan, *An Account of the Work of God, in Newfoundland, North-America, In a Series of Letters, to Which are Prefixed a Few Choice Experiences; Some of Which Were Taken from the Lips of Persons, Who Died Triumphantly in the Faith. To Which are Added, Some Excellent Sentiments, Extracted from the Writings of an Eminent Divine, Humbly Dedicated to the Right Honourable the Countess of Huntingdon* (London: W. Gilbert, 1776), 11.
13. Accounts and analysis of Coughlan's activities can be found in Hans Rollmann, "Laurence Coughlan and the Origins of Newfoundland Methodism," in *The Contribution of Methodism to Atlantic Canada*, eds. C.H. Scobie and J.W. Grant (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 53-76; and S. Dawn Barrett, "Revivalism and the Origins of Newfoundland Methodism: 1766-1774," M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1993.
14. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 187.
15. James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 70.
16. Doris Elliott, interview by author, 3 October 1991, Tape recording #5A.
17. E.J. Pratt, *E.J. Pratt on his Life and Poetry*, ed. Susan Gingell (Toronto, 1983), 13; quoted in David G. Pitt, "Methodism and E.J. Pratt: A Study of the Methodist Background of a Canadian Poet and its Influence on his Life and Work," Paper presented a conference titled, "The Contribution of Methodism to Atlantic Canada," Mount Allison University, 6-8 October, 1989), 6.

18. Carbonear District Spiritual State Reports, 1895, WY-200, Box 1, Archives of The United Church of Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador Conference, St. John's NF.
19. Walter Hudson, interview by author, 30 January 1992, St. John's NF. Tape recording #11.
20. Roy Andrews, interview by author, 2 October 1991, Nipper's Harbour NF. Tape recording #4; Louisa Whelan, interview by author 20 September 1991, Hickman's Harbour NF. Tape recording #1.
21. Doris Elliott interview.
22. Alberta Pennell, interview by author, 4 October 1991, Gander NF. Tape recording #6.
23. James England, Journal, 25 February 1839, WY-500, Box 78, Newfoundland United Church Archives.
24. Walter Hudson interview.
25. This phrase was current in the Salvation Army (see R.G. Moyles, *The Blood and the Fire in Canada* [Toronto: Peter Martin, 1977], 82).
26. Louise Whelan, Roy Andrews interviews.
27. Naida Robbins, interview by author, 5 October 1991, Lumsden NF. Tape recording #7B.
28. Wilf Norman interview.
29. Naida Robbins interview.
30. Leslie Fifield, interview by author, 6 October 1991, Lumsden NF. Tape recording #9.
31. Several interviewees mention that more old people than young would testify regularly (Louisa Whelan interview; Elsie Norman and Pearl Fifield, interview by author, 6 October 1991, Lumsden NF. Tape recording #9).
32. Louisa Whelan interview.
33. These comments on "behaviour codes" are taken from Walter and Roy Andrews, Naida Robbins, and Greta Moores interviews, and from the Carbonear District Spiritual State report for Brigus, 1885, WY-200, Box 1, Newfoundland United Church Archives.

34. Greta Moores, interview by author, 30 September 1991, Red Bay, Labrador. Tape recording #2.
35. Report of Blackhead to Newfoundland District Minutes, 1834, 203. WY-103, Box 2, Newfoundland United Church Archives.
36. Brigus Circuit Book, 1881; report of Hant's Harbour in Carbonear District Spiritual State Reports, 1895, WY-200, Box 1, Newfoundland United Church Archives; *Monthly Greeting* editorial, May 1899, 72.
37. Report from Red Bay to *Monthly Greeting*, May 1891, 266.
38. Greta Moores, Walter Hudson interviews.
39. Walter Hudson interview.
40. Walter Hudson interview.
41. Newfoundland Conference Minutes, 1886, 40. WY-100, Box 2, Newfoundland United Church Archives.