

“Boy meets Girl”: Constructing Heterosexuality in Two Victoria Churches, 1945-1960

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Volume 10, Number 1, 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030516ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/030516ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Block, T. (1999). “Boy meets Girl”: Constructing Heterosexuality in Two Victoria Churches, 1945-1960. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 10(1), 279–296. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030516ar>

Article abstract

Canadian historians have neglected the role of churches and religion in shaping post-war sexual, gender, and domestic ideals. This article explores the interplay of religion and sexuality in Glad Tidings Pentecostal and First United Church in Victoria, British Columbia. It argues that church officials actively regulated and defined heterosexual gender relations in the late 1940s and 1950s. While traditional “family values” were upheld in Glad Tidings, Pentecostal beliefs about the individual’s relationship with God subtly challenged the primacy of heterosexual marriage. The United Church defined marriage as the most important of relationships, and, drawing on the advice of secular “experts”, started a range of sexual and marital training programs in the post-war years. While church officials contributed to the post-war normalisation of heterosexuality, religion also helped to shape alternative and contested meanings of sexuality and family in this period.

“Boy meets Girl”: Constructing Heterosexuality in Two Victoria Churches, 1945-1960

TINA BLOCK

In the decade and a half following World War Two, Canadians were getting married in greater numbers, and having more children, than in the previous years of the twentieth century.¹ While this is partly explained by the return of servicemen after the war, it can also be viewed in relation to larger discourses which made belonging to a nuclear family a key to social acceptance in the postwar culture. Recently, gender historians have begun to show how the postwar domestic ideal, based on heterosexual marriage, homemaking wives, breadwinning fathers, and suburban homes, was produced and circulated in the arenas of psychology, social reform, public education, and the popular media.² Historians have yet to consider the ways in which Canadian churches and religion helped to shape the sexual, gender, and family norms of this period. This paper addresses this absence by exploring postwar efforts to define and regulate heterosexual gender relations in Glad Tidings Pentecostal Church and First United Church in Victoria, British Columbia.

The postwar period was a time of substantial church growth in Canada.³ During these years, Canadians were becoming involved in churches in ever-

The author would like to thank Lynne Marks for her help and encouragement, the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, and the interviewees for so generously sharing their memories with me. I am also grateful for the financial assistance provided by the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, the Faculty of Graduate Studies, and the History Department at the University of Victoria.

- 1 Mariana Valverde, “Building Anti-Delinquent Communities: Morality, Gender, and Generation in the City,” in *A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945-1980*. Joy Parr, ed. (Toronto, 1995), 19; Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto, 1997), 166.
- 2 See, for example, many of the articles in Joy Parr, ed., *A Diversity of Women*; Mona Gleason, “Psychology and the Construction of the ‘Normal Family’ in Postwar Canada, 1945-1960,” *Canadian Historical Review* 78 (September 1997): 442-77; Veronica Strong-Boag, “Canada’s Wage-Earning Wives and the Construction of the Middle Class, 1945-1960,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 29 (Fall 1994): 5-25. For American studies, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988); and Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia, 1994).
- 3 John G. Stackhouse Jr., “The Protestant Experience in Canada since 1945,” in *The Canadian Protestant Experience: 1760-1990*. George Rawlyk, ed. (Burlington, 1990), 199-207.

increasing numbers, and religion significantly shaped the ways in which ordinary people made sense of themselves and their worlds. Nonetheless, the historiography of gender, sexuality, and the family in this era has remained overwhelmingly secular in its focus. Despite the importance of the church in the lives of many Canadians in the 1940s and 1950s, historians have presumed that the social norms of the day were defined by psychology, social reform, and other secular discourses, not by religion. At the same time, the category of sexuality rarely figures in the historiography of religion in Canada, which has tended to reflect the concerns and methods of institutional and intellectual history.⁴ By bringing together subjects that have remained largely separate in the existing scholarship, this paper contributes new insights to the history of religion, gender, sexuality, and the family in postwar Canada. Moreover, by focusing on British Columbia, this paper addresses a region largely passed over by historians of religion in Canada.⁵

Before beginning my analysis, the churches under consideration in this study require some introduction. During the postwar period, Glad Tidings and First United contained the largest Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAOC) and United Church of Canada (UCC) congregations in Victoria. Like most other Pentecostal and United churches in B.C. and across Canada, the membership of these congregations grew in the late 1940s and 1950s.⁶ Glad Tidings and First United were both downtown churches with largely white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class memberships. These congregations, then, cannot be presumed to represent the many suburban churches which sprang up in Victoria during this period, or those churches which attracted greater numbers of non-white, non-Anglo-Saxon, or working-class members. The research for this paper is based on archival material from these two churches, and on 19 oral interviews conducted with individuals who were members of these congregations between

4 Although Canadian religious historiography has long been dominated by the study of religious ideas and institutions, the social history of religion is under way. For a recent Canadian study on the social history of religion, see Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto, 1996).

5 A notable exception is Robert Burkinshaw, *Pilgrims in Lotus Land: Conservative Protestantism in British Columbia, 1917-1981* (Montreal, 1995). For the most part, Canadian historians of religion have focused on Ontario.

6 First United Church, *First United Church: One Hundred Years, 1862-1962* (Victoria, 1962). Glad Tidings Pentecostal Church, *Glad Tidings: 60th Anniversary, 1923-1983* (Victoria, 1983). Although B.C. experienced church growth in the postwar period, it has remained, throughout the twentieth century, the most secular of Canadian provinces. The present paper focuses on church members, but the uniquely "unchurched" character of BC invites further investigation. For pioneering studies of BC secularism, see Bob Stewart, "'That's the BC Spirit!': Religion and Secularity in Lotus Land," *Canadian Society of Church History Papers* (1983), and Burkinshaw, *Pilgrims in Lotus Land*.

1945 and 1960.⁷ This paper also draws on a range of provincial and national literature published by the PAOC and UCC. Evidence from this wider literature indicates that Glad Tidings and First United leaders were not alone in their concerns about the state of the postwar family. The initiatives undertaken to prescribe marital and sexual behaviours in Glad Tidings and First United were mirrored in other Pentecostal and United churches in B.C. and across Canada. Thus, while heterosexual gender relations were negotiated in particular ways within the context of these two local congregations, the efforts of Glad Tidings and First United officials to define and regulate sexual, gender, and family practices reflected a broader, national pattern in the UCC and PAOC.

Although Glad Tidings and First United were similar in terms of location and membership, they upheld competing theologies, religious practices, and views of the secular world. The religious life of Glad Tidings was shaped by the Pentecostal emphasis on spiritual gifts, biblical inerrancy, the individual's relationship with God, and separation from the secular culture. Nicknamed “holy rollers,” Pentecostals insisted on high standards of holiness and engaged in unconventional and emotional practices such as tongues-speaking. In Pentecostalism, churches were regarded as “communities of saints,” gatherings of true believers united by the shared experiences of conversion and the baptism of the Holy Spirit.⁸ Although they were beginning to accommodate to the dominant Canadian culture, Pentecostals continued to be viewed as a “peculiar people” in the 1950s. In contrast to the conservative evangelical congregation of Glad Tidings, First United was a mainline church with a strong focus on social and community service rather than personal piety. Like its larger organisation, the UCC, First United was characterised by a liberal theology and deep links with the secular world.

We might expect that churches were more apt than other institutions to reflect and entrench dominant postwar norms of heterosexual marriage and nuclear family life. My research on these local congregations did not bear out this expectation. These churches defined gender, family, and sexuality in ways

7 The names of the interviewees in this study have all been changed. Narrators were located with the help of the church secretaries and pastors of Glad Tidings and First United. To take part in this study, individuals had to have been members of the church at some point between 1945 and 1960, and have reached at least 16 years of age by 1945. The interviewees were asked a range of open-ended questions about various subjects such as church associations, family, and spirituality. For a more comprehensive discussion of the interviewing methods used in this study, see Tina Block, “‘Housewifely Prayers’ and Manly Visions: Gender, Faith, and Family in Two Victoria Churches, 1945-1960,” MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1999.

8 See, for example, Thomas William Miller, *Canadian Pentecostals: A History of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada* (Mississauga, 1994). For a fascinating study in the American context, see Edith Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith: The Assemblies of God, Pentecostalism, and American Culture* (Urbana, 1993).

which were both complex and diverse, and which reflected their competing doctrines and perceptions of secular culture. First United responded readily to the challenge of family decline, and started new church groups and programs to teach young people proper sexual and marriage practices. While the United Church reinforced Christian “family values,” it also embraced the emerging and often contradictory notions of sexuality and marriage dictated by secular professionals or “experts.” By contrast, secular, “expert” discourses on heterosexual gender relations remained largely irrelevant in Glad Tidings, where church officials advocated worldly separation and reaffirmed conservative evangelical ideals of family. While conventional domestic norms were upheld in Glad Tidings, Pentecostal beliefs about the sanctity of the individual’s relationship with God subtly undercut the significance attached to heterosexual couplehood.

Most of us are familiar with the stereotype of the baby-boom years as a time of peaceful domesticity, gender stability, and family togetherness. This period is less often recognised as one of social change and unrest. In these years, professional and popular observers pointed to a crisis in marriage and family breakdown. Reports of rising rates of divorce, teenage pregnancies, absent fathers, and wage-earning wives reflected deepening uncertainty over the nature of gender and family practices.⁹ Pentecostal and United Church leaders drew on, and helped to produce, this rhetoric of family decline.

Postwar anxieties often centred on the delinquent behaviour of youth which, it was argued, both reflected and contributed to family breakdown.¹⁰ In the years after the war, the problem of juvenile delinquency was frequently discussed in these churches.¹¹ This era did not, of course, mark the beginning of church concerns about youth. In the nineteenth century, Canadian Protestant leaders often denounced the wild and disorderly behaviour of young people, and particularly of young men.¹² In the postwar years, the seeming crisis in marriage and family failures meant that the sexual practices of young people were of particular concern. Church officials viewed sexual deviance as an inevitable product of the war years. In 1947, one United Church leader observed that the “moral license and cynicism that follow all wars are already

9 Gleason, “Psychology and the Construction of the ‘Normal Family,’” 452.

10 See, for example, Adams, *The Trouble with Normal*, and Valverde, “Building Anti-Delinquent Communities.”

11 PAOC District of BC archives [hereafter PDBA], Circular Letters, No.1, 1957; No.3, 1958. *Pentecostal Testimony* (June 1945): 14; (August 1945): 7; (December 1945): 13; (January 1947): 4; (March 1947): 13; (January 1949): 12; (February 1949): 13. First United Church archives [hereafter FUA], Bulletins, 23 April 1944; 4 March 1945; 4 November 1956. FUA, Women’s Association collection, Oak Bay Group *Minutes*, February 1946; Jubilee Group *Minutes*, May 1949.

12 See, for example, Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks*, 81-87.

on us,” while the District Superintendent of the PAOC in B.C. complained about the “spirit of wartime abandon, with its last fling philosophy providing justification to less resolute wills to violate the conventions of society.”¹³ Church leaders bemoaned the “crisis” in venereal diseases and the seeming rise of “sex-perversed” forms of popular culture.¹⁴ Immoral sexuality was constructed as a problem particular to youth, and as a serious threat to the stability of the Christian family. The rise in promiscuity, remarked one United Church official, meant that the “home, the fundamental institution of society, is threatened by insidious forces.”¹⁵

In the larger culture, these new challenges on the domestic front inspired a rise in films, advice manuals, books, and programs designed to teach young people proper standards of sexuality.¹⁶ The United Church embraced these secular practices, and solicited the help of specialists in the fields of social service, psychology, and public education to construct sexual education programs.¹⁷ United Church officials urged parents and teachers to speak frankly to young people about sexuality. The inhibited, “Victorian view of sex,” they argued, left “a morbid interest due to curiosity not satisfied.”¹⁸ Through these years, local United Church congregations introduced new sexual guidance materials for youth which addressed subjects such as birth control, dating, and pre-marital chastity.¹⁹ Young people learned that while it was an open topic of discussion, sexual desire was to be reserved for marriage. Pre-marital sexual indulgences, a United Church handbook warned, “destroy sensitivity in human relationships, endanger the security of marriage, and undermine the family in society.”²⁰ With sufficient instruction, it was argued, the “well adjusted young person, who has

13 UCC Board of Evangelism and Social Service [hereafter UBES], *Annual Report* (1947): i. *Pentecostal Testimony* (March 1947): 13.

14 UCC Board of Information and Stewardship [hereafter UBIS], *Signals for the Sixties* (Toronto, 1961), 1. UCC Board of Christian Education [hereafter UBCE], *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, Marriage* (Toronto, 1960), 13. See UBES, *Annual Report* (1945-1947) for numerous reports on the “crisis” in venereal diseases. See also PDBA, Circular Letters, No.1, 1957. *Pentecostal Testimony* (March 1947): 13; (May 1947): 4; (December 1949): 8. For a discussion of how the threat of VD to men in the armed services shaped post-war discourses on promiscuity, see Adams, *The Trouble with Normal*, 121, and Regina G. Kunzel, “White Neurosis, Black Pathology: Constructing Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy in the Wartime and Postwar United States,” in *Not June Cleaver*, 315.

15 UBES, *Annual Report* (1945): 39.

16 Adams, *The Trouble with Normal*, 98.

17 For UCC initiatives on sexual education and marital preparation see, for example, UBES, *Annual Report* (1945): 17; UBCE, *Sex, Love, Marriage*, vi; and UBIS, *Signals for the Sixties*, 54.

18 UBES, *Annual Report* (1956): 67; (1959): 57.

19 UBES, *Annual Report* (1945): 17; (1946): 87 and 119; (1947): 90; (1952): 90; (1953): 54; (1957): 88. UBCE, *Sex, Love, Marriage*, 18.

20 UBCE, *Sex, Love, Marriage*, 5, 8, and 14.

had wise guidance, sets definite limits beyond which sexual play will not be permitted.”²¹ At First United, young people were told about the dangers of pre-marital sexual “play” in sermons and panel discussions on subjects such as “Fidelity – in and out of marriage,” “Liquor and Sex,” and “Boy Meets Girl.”²²

In the postwar period, the “crisis” in family breakdown was often linked to the perceived rise of illicit images in movies, radio, television, and other emerging forms of popular culture.²³ Although they shared concerns about the impact of a seemingly “sexualised” popular culture on postwar youth, Pentecostal and United Church leaders approached this issue in different ways. To counter the effects of popular culture, United Church officials focused on teaching young people to control their sexual desires, to valorise marriage, and to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviours. By contrast, Pentecostal leaders insisted that the only solution to teenage promiscuity was separation from the secular, modern world. Pentecostal parents were told to reject the “paganized social system and godless educational system” of the world, and to shut the doors of their homes “against every pernicious influence and person. Make sure that when they are shut that your sons and daughters are shut in with you.”²⁴ The BC District Superintendent of the PAOC outlined the following reasons for promiscuous and delinquent behaviour among youth: “*Modern music*, with its dirty, seductive croonings. *Modern dancing*, which breaks down self control, and lowers all moral standards. *Motion picture shows*, portraying everything that could be imagined in sex and crime films. The *theatre* has become a place for the youth of this day to get a criminal and sex-perversed education.”²⁵ Pentecostal young people were told to avoid sexual temptation by associating with like-minded friends, and abstaining from secular amusements. A 1949 article in the *Pentecostal Testimony* pointed to the immoral sexual activities of worldly youth, such as “nude bathing parties,” and warned Pentecostal parents to “pray earnestly for their own boys and girls who have to attend public schools and mingle with other boys and girls given over to the unholy pursuits of life.”²⁶ For Pentecostals, isolation from the influences of secular, popular culture, rather than sexual and marital education, was key to producing wholesome brides and grooms of the future.

Like United Church officials, Pentecostal leaders described pre-marital sexual activities as a threat to stable and lasting marriages. Pentecostal young people were told that “the man or woman who has been promiscuous, who has

21 Ibid., 14.

22 FUA, Bulletins, 10 November 1946; 10 February 1957.

23 Adams, *The Trouble with Normal*, 137; Gleason, “Psychology and the Construction of the ‘Normal Family,’” 452.

24 *Pentecostal Testimony* (June 1945): 14.

25 *Pentecostal Testimony* (March 1947): 13.

26 *Pentecostal Testimony* (March 1949): 13.

frequently and easily dated and necked and petted, will be restless and dissatisfied after marriage.”²⁷ Although they shared United Church views on promiscuity, PAOC leaders did not advocate formal sexual education programs until the 1960s.²⁸ Instead, they objected to the secular emphasis on sexual frankness, and condemned “modern” mothers for teaching their daughters birth control.²⁹ Marilyn Williams remarked that, in the postwar years, Glad Tidings women

frowned very much if a girl happened to get pregnant and wasn't married, I mean, it was the end of the world. One didn't go out and have a one night stand, and things like birth control were never discussed, like they are now. Oh, good heavens. Like some of the older ones, they're still whispering [whispers] “in a family way,” you know, they couldn't say the word “pregnant” if it killed them [laughs].³⁰

In this period, Glad Tidings members learned that sexuality was a topic to be avoided, and that the only remedy for teenage promiscuity was separation from the modern world.

How did young people in these churches negotiate with prescriptive notions of sexuality? It is evident that for many young people, church services, gatherings, and associations offered opportunities for heterosexual flirtation. This caused one Pentecostal pastor to complain: “We have right now about seven young couples in our church and they sit back in the congregation and make eyes at each other. They are not courting in church, but their minds are on those things, and I should like to rush them through those years.”³¹ Evidence from the oral narratives of church members suggests that many young people in both congregations met their marital partners at church services and in youth groups.³² First United member Gordon Watson recalled “making eyes” at his

27 *Pentecostal Testimony* (November 1949): 8. C.M. Ward, *Revivaltime Pulpit* (Springfield, 1961), 51-56. C. M. Ward was pastor of Glad Tidings between 1931 and 1934.

28 PDBA, Annual District Conference *Minutes*, 1961. At this conference, a report was read from a “committee appointed by General Conference to prepare material for Sex Education and Marital Counselling.” See also Ronald A.N. Kydd, “The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada and Society,” *Canadian Society of Church History Papers* (1972-1973): 10. Kydd notes that a 1970 issue of the *Pentecostal Testimony* contained an article promoting sexual education.

29 *Pentecostal Testimony* (January 1944): 12.

30 Marilyn Williams, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 12 August 1998.

31 *Pentecostal Testimony* (February 1947): 16.

32 Thomas Marshall, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 3 July 1998; Joanne Lewis, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 23 July 1998; Anne and Gordon Watson, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 3 September 1998; Barbara Griffith, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 30 October 1998; Edward Maxwell, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 9 July 1998; Mary Smith, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 27 July 1998; Harold and Ruth Jensen, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 11 August 1998; Maureen Graham, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 7 October 1998.

future wife while she was singing in the church choir.³³ As a young woman, Glad Tidings member Marilyn Williams flirted with young men at church services:

I always went to church, because my mother insisted on it, and I had such respect for her, that I didn't want to hurt her. But my heart certainly wasn't in it in those days, but my heart certainly was in sitting across from the army boys and seeing which was the best looking in the row, and getting the idea we might meet after church, which we often did.³⁴

According to Harold Jensen, "there was almost a wedding every month" between young men and women who met in the Glad Tidings youth group.³⁵ Between 1941 and 1951, Glad Tidings was home to the British Columbia Bible Institute.³⁶ That it was commonly referred to as "bridal school" suggests that the bible school also provided opportunities for heterosexual courtship.³⁷

Many young people met and married other church youth, which indicates that these congregations provided some space for the expression of heterosexual desire. By looking for prospective marital partners in church, however, young people posed no real challenge to church expectations of appropriate sexual behaviour. It is difficult to determine how such expectations shaped the experiences of church young people. In their oral narratives, First United members made little mention of formal rules on dating. To ensure conformity to high standards of holiness, the behaviour of Pentecostal youth was monitored more closely. Pentecostal girls, in particular, were warned not to be "taken out by every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the country."³⁸ Maureen Graham recalled that while attending the bible school "you had to have permission to date somebody."³⁹ While Maureen agreed with this rule, Marilyn Williams questioned it. Flipping through a bible school yearbook, Marilyn came upon a picture of a man she dated and commented:

if you went out with a man once, then you were stuck with him the whole year. They wouldn't let you date anybody else because they didn't want you to be promiscuous, whatever that could mean in relation to going out with a man. So, we got stuck together. Just fought like cats and dogs the whole year!⁴⁰

Evidence from the oral narratives of church members suggests that unlike Marilyn, most Glad Tidings young people accepted Pentecostal prescriptions.

33 Watson, interview.

34 Williams, interview.

35 Jensen, interview.

36 Glad Tidings Pentecostal Church, *60th Anniversary*, 16.

37 Williams, interview; Miller, *Canadian Pentecostals*, 317.

38 *Pentecostal Testimony* (November 1949): 8.

39 Graham, interview.

40 Williams, interview.

“BOY MEETS GIRL”

Many narrators recalled that they refrained from dancing and mixed swimming as young men and women, because such activities inevitably created sexual temptations.⁴¹

More than Glad Tidings, First United was shaped by and helped to produce what has been referred to as the postwar “cult of marriage.”⁴² Professional marital instructors became more common in the postwar period, and the University of British Columbia introduced its first course on marriage in 1945.⁴³ These initiatives were framed by the assumption that marriage failures were the result of inadequate preparation. Parents were told that, although their teachings were important, the future brides and grooms of Canada needed the guidance of “experts” to ensure their success in marriage. Drawing on these secular notions, United Church officials defined marriage as an increasingly unstable relationship, and cautioned that the “average parent is not capable of understanding all that is happening to family life...They will need help and guidance.”⁴⁴ To prepare young people for “the most intimate and complex of relationships,” the UCC set up a “National Marriage Guidance Council” in 1948.⁴⁵ First United formed a “School for Brides and Grooms” in 1957, a six-week course designed and led by doctors and specialists.⁴⁶ Through these years, First United held lectures and sermons for young people on subjects such as “Ten Rules for a Happy Marriage,” “What a Woman Expects of a Man,” “On Choosing a Wife,” and “The Woman Who Married the Wrong Man.”⁴⁷

First United young people were told that because it was the most important of relationships, marriage needed to be studied and prepared for. Marriage education was not evident in Glad Tidings, where young people learned to value spiritual over earthly relationships. A comparison of the young adult associations in these churches highlights these competing views of marriage. Apart from men’s and women’s service associations, the central group for young adults in Glad Tidings was the Christ’s Ambassadors. This group included married and single people from ages 13 to 40.⁴⁸ Glad Tidings member Mary Smith mentioned that she tried to start a group for couples in the latter part of the 1950s, but it never took hold.⁴⁹ Upon first coming to Glad Tidings during the

41 Elma and Elizabeth Johnson, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 9 June 1998; Doris MacDonald, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 13 August 1998; Smith, interview; Graham, interview.

42 Gleason, “Psychology and the Construction of the ‘Normal Family,’” 455.

43 *Ibid.*, 456.

44 UBCE, *Sex, Love, Marriage*, 39.

45 *Ibid.*, vi and 18.

46 FUA, *Bulletins*, 25 August 1957.

47 FUA, *Bulletins*, 23 October 1949; 29 April 1956; 17 May 1959; 8 May 1960; 18 May 1960.

48 June Peterson, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 2 September 1998; Smith, interview; MacDonald, interview; Jensen, interview; and Graham, interview.

49 Smith, interview.

war, Harold Jensen attempted to organise a young men's group, but was told by the pastor to "keep it co-ed."⁵⁰ By breaking down barriers of age, gender, and marital status, the Glad Tidings young people's group embodied the notion that secular status divisions were unimportant in the Pentecostal "community of saints."

There was a young people's group for older teenagers and young adults in First United, but it did not have a large appeal in the years following the war. A number of First United narrators could not even recall the existence of a young people's association.⁵¹ The greater success of the young peoples' group in Glad Tidings can be partly attributed to the Pentecostal insistence on rejecting worldly amusements. It is likely that First United young people were drawn to the many secular sports and leisure activities for youth in the 1940s and 1950s. I would also suggest that the role of the young people's union was limited in First United because of the central place of couples' clubs in this congregation. In contrast to the Christ's Ambassadors, the First United young people's group included only single individuals. Young, married people in First United could find social and spiritual fellowship in couples' clubs, which flourished in the postwar years. The emergence of couples' clubs represented a significant departure from the earlier focus in Protestant churches on young men's and women's groups.⁵² Developing out of widespread anxieties about the nature of family life, United Church couples' clubs reflected, and helped to construct, the postwar "heterosexual hegemony."

At First United, couples' clubs were formed in 1948, 1950, and 1957.⁵³ These clubs were generally made up of about 15 young, married couples. Although they often contributed to the church through fundraising and work projects, couples' clubs were intended to be social rather than service organisations.⁵⁴ Part of a national "Couples' Club Movement" in the UCC, the groups in First United were designed to strengthen and encourage wholesome marriage relationships.⁵⁵ In 1957, club members agreed to sponsor the "School for Brides and Grooms," a marriage course for young, engaged couples in the congregation.⁵⁶ Club members attended preparatory services, where they invited

50 Jensen, interview.

51 James Ingram, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 10 June 1998; Henry Campbell, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 7 October 1998; Griffith, interview.

52 UBCE, *Sex, Love, Marriage*, 25-26.

53 FUA, Couples' Club collection, Friday group *Minutes*, 1948-1960; Wednesday group *Minutes*, 1950-1960. FUA, *First United Church Annual Report*, 1950 and 1957. By 1968 there were 94 UCC couples' clubs in BC, and 2004 in Canada. See UBCE, *Couples' Club Confidential* (Toronto, 1969), 7.

54 FUA, Couples' Club collection, Friday group *Minutes*, February 1960.

55 UBCE, *Couples' Club Confidential* (Toronto, 1968).

56 FUA, *First United Church Annual Report*, 1957. FUA, Couples' Club collection, Friday group *Minutes*, May 1957; Wednesday group *Minutes*, May 1957.

engaged couples to join one of the groups upon marriage.⁵⁷ The First United groups were often present at the meetings of newly formed couples’ clubs in other Victoria churches, to offer guidance and support.⁵⁸ By nurturing young couples within their congregation and beyond, First United couples’ clubs affirmed the social significance of marriage.

The couples’ club constitution stated that the groups were formed “to appreciate to the fullest degree a home-centred Christian Fellowship.”⁵⁹ These clubs helped to entrench traditional family forms. At club meetings, *Parentalk* magazine was circulated and the nature of parenthood was often discussed. According to First United narrator Joanne Lewis, the Friday Night couples’ club was made up of “young marrieds after the war, with young children.”⁶⁰ Within these clubs, it was taken for granted that children were central to what it meant to be a family. The domestic emphasis of couples’ clubs is reflected in group seminars and devotionals on subjects such as “Music in the Home,” “Religion and its place in Family Life,” “The Christian Home,” and “How to make your dream house come true.”⁶¹ Members reaffirmed domestic ideals, but they also discussed new factors affecting the family. Literature and lectures on subjects such as “Should TV be installed in every home?” “The religious and legal aspects of divorce,” and “When should sex education begin in the home?” reflect the efforts of club members to make sense of changing family practices.⁶²

First United couples’ clubs embodied the contradictory meanings of gender and family in the wider postwar society. Canadian historians have shown the tensions between newer and traditional forms of gender and family organisation in the 1940s and 1950s.⁶³ There were both champions and detractors of the “modern” family in the larger culture of these years. Some postwar commentators advocated changes to the family, and encouraged greater flexibility in gender roles, mutuality in marriage, and increased independence of children. Pentecostal leaders viewed these modern trends in family life with suspicion,

57 FUA, Couples’ Club collection, Wednesday group *Minutes*, February 1954.

58 FUA, Couples’ Club collection, Wednesday group *Minutes*, June 1953 and April 1956.

59 FUA, Couples’ Club collection, “Couples’ Club Constitution.”

60 Lewis, interview.

61 FUA, Couples’ Club collection, Friday group *Minutes*, March 1949 and May 1959; Wednesday group *Minutes*, April 1953 and February 1954.

62 FUA, Couples’ Club collection, Friday group *Minutes*, May 1951, March 1955, March 1956, and February 1958; Wednesday group *Minutes*, April 1956 and April 1958. FUA, Couples’ Club collection, *Parentalk*, np.nd; “Couples’ Club Review,” 1950-1955.

63 See, for example, Valverde, “Building Anti-Delinquent Communities,” 39; Gleason, “Psychology and the Construction of the ‘Normal Family,’” 456; and Strong-Boag, “Canada’s Wage-Earning Wives.” For an insightful American study, see Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958,” in *Not June Cleaver*.

and prescribed rigid gender roles, male authority, and the obedience of children within the home. United Church definitions of the family were more ambiguous, and reflected both conventional and newer gender and family ideologies.

The following passage from a United Church handbook reflects emerging notions of gender overlap and freedom within marriage:

The man, no longer the sole provider and source of authority is more a participant in home-making, and the couple undertake their responsibilities of child rearing and housekeeping jointly. The distinctive roles of husband and wife are changing, but are not yet clear and distinct. Where either husband or wife is immature, these changes and this new freedom may result in family discord and, if serious, to family breakdown.⁶⁴

United Church couples' clubs were formed, in part, to help newly married couples adjust to changing gender roles within the family. A club handbook attributed the success of the movement to the "desire on the part of men and women to work *together* in the church, rather than separately... Increasingly, men and women are sharing roles in home life, in work, in recreation. Why should the church, one of whose primary functions is fellowship at the deepest personal level, be a fragmenting agent?"⁶⁵ Couples' clubs were intended to both foster and reflect new, dominant values of "genuine partnership marriage."⁶⁶ This rhetoric of partnership is evident in the names of First United couples' clubs, such as "Two by Two" and "Fifty-Fifty." It also shaped the club programs, where activities and responsibilities were to be shared equally by wives and husbands. The couples' club constitution clearly stated that "offices [were] to be held by Couples rather than by individuals."⁶⁷

A United Church handbook observed that in partnership marriages, "the stereotypes of 'masculine' and 'feminine' give way for a full appreciation of human potential."⁶⁸ Were couples' clubs free of gender stereotypes? Did United Church notions of mutuality in marriage significantly alter conventional gender roles? The evidence suggests that new definitions of marriage did little to disturb traditional gender norms within couples' clubs, and within the larger post-war culture.⁶⁹ Although officers' positions in the clubs were formally held by couples, a man generally acted as president and a woman as secretary at group meetings. When asked about the roles of men and women in the club, Gordon Watson recalled that "most of the offices of the club were pretty near partner-

64 UBCE, *Sex, Love, Marriage*, 8.

65 UBCE, *Couples' Club Confidential* (Toronto, 1969), 3.

66 UBCE, *Sex, Love, Marriage*, 25.

67 FUA, Couples' Club collection, "Couples' Club Constitution."

68 *Ibid.*, 27.

69 Adams, *The Trouble with Normal*, 34.

ships.” While his wife Anne initially agreed, upon further consideration she admitted: “that was the starting of it, but I think that kind of wore off after awhile, I think most of the girls got the jobs to do! [laughs].”⁷⁰ Another former member of the Friday Night club, Joanne Lewis, remarked: “we shared the roles as couples in our couples’ club.” In later reflection, she noted that “we had our worship service, which each of the couples took their turn preparing, even if some of the fellows were not quite at home doing that, they could always read the scripture or do something of that sort.”⁷¹ Joanne’s comment suggests that women were more likely than men to prepare worship services, which indicates that the feminised meanings of spirituality shaped gender practices in the club. The service and social activities of the club were also dictated by gender. Women mended dolls’ clothes for the nursery, provided refreshments for the meetings, and compiled cookbooks, while men constructed nativity scenes, painted nursery chairs, and gave speeches on their occupations.⁷²

In couples’ clubs, young people negotiated with the competing meanings of “traditional” and “modern” marriages. Members engaged in panel discussions and debates on subjects such as “Should Wives Accompany their Husbands on Fishing Trips?,” “Should Married Women Work?” and “Be it resolved that Husbands should Help with the Housework.”⁷³ Such topics indicate that young couples struggled to make sense of the contradictory directives of mutual yet distinct gender roles in marriage. Occasionally the couples’ clubs put on a “Men’s Night,” during which members both affirmed and ridiculed gender norms. On Men’s Night, the male club members directed the evening’s program. At these meetings, which were described as “giddy” and “nonsensical,” the men took off their ties, mimicked female performers, made motions to remove the “fair sex” from the comfortable chairs, and led the group in “masculine” games.⁷⁴ Gender roles within the club were often reversed on Men’s Night. Men took the devotional and provided the refreshments, duties which fell largely to women at regular meetings. The Friday group secretary noted that on Men’s Night, “with the aid of can-opener and bake shop the fellows excelled themselves.”⁷⁵ The playful antics of Men’s Night did not fundamentally challenge gender norms. Club members recognised that sex reversals on Men’s Night were both temporary and “nonsensical.” In official church discourses, couples’ clubs were to embody and promote true partnership marriage. The

70 Watson, interview.

71 Lewis, interview.

72 Lewis, interview. FUA, Couples’ Club collection, Friday group *Minutes*, 1948-1960; Wednesday group *Minutes*, 1950-1960; *Couples’ Club Cookbook* (Missouri, nd).

73 FUA, Couples’ Club collection, Friday group *Minutes*, March 1955 and April 1959.

74 FUA, Couples’ Club collection, Friday group *Minutes*, May 1958 and November 1961.

75 FUA, Couples’ Club collection, Friday group *Minutes*, November 1961.

meanings of marriage were considerably more complex at the level of group activities, where members both affirmed the importance of gender mutuality, and reinforced conventional views of gender.

When asked whether or not he participated in a young people's group at First United, Gordon Watson frankly replied "We weren't young people, we were a young married couple."⁷⁶ For club members, marital status and age were important categories of identity, although it is clear that gender cut across these identities. The recollections of club members suggest that shared marital identities may have outweighed class differences within the groups. Anne Watson pointed out that in the club, "Some were better off than others, and some were better educated than others, but we were all at the beginning of our married and family life."⁷⁷ These clubs were defined not only by marital status, but by age. In 1958, a First United Church Committee on Couples' Clubs resolved that in order to ensure the continued success of the clubs, "couples should be in one age group."⁷⁸ Indeed, some First United members chose not to join the clubs because they felt they were too old.⁷⁹ Anne Watson, who belonged to the Friday Night club, recalled that when the Wednesday group was formed "they were a younger group still. New marrieds again, you see, they had things in common."⁸⁰ The 1958 annual report of the UCC Board of Evangelism and Social Service declared that the "young married couple in the community is one of the most important units in setting social patterns and establishing the culture of our time."⁸¹ Couples' clubs helped make being a "young married" a desirable and respectable social position in the wider postwar world.

In United Church couples' clubs, sermons, and marital and sexual education programs, marriage was drawn as the most important of relationships. The value attached to married heterosexuality likely made single people feel subtly abnormal. In United Church literature, discussions of single people were cloaked in family rhetoric. Considering the needs of single people, a United Church handbook observed that in "former generations the single women usually found an important and satisfying place in the larger family circle. Today she must reach out to a wider community. Fulfilment of her needs for affection in a concentrated form cannot easily be met outside of marriage."⁸² Single people, and particularly single women, were advised to live together in apartments to simulate the close support of family relationships.⁸³ The handbook urged

76 Watson, interview.

77 Ibid.

78 FUA, Couples' Club collection, "Report on Findings on Committee on Couples' Clubs," 5 November 1958.

79 Frank and Marion Stevens, interview by author, Victoria, BC, 10 August 1998.

80 Watson, interview.

81 UBES, *Annual Report* (1958): 88.

82 UBCE, *Sex, Love, Marriage*, 29.

83 Ibid., 30.

local congregations to reach out to single individuals, who were presumed to require “counselling and encouragement in order to acknowledge their unexpressed wish to be married.”⁸⁴ Those who deviated from accepted social norms, and remained single, were suspected of repressing their latent and natural desire to marry.

While being a “new married” was necessary for membership in First United couples’ clubs, differences of marital status were insignificant in the Glad Tidings young people’s group. There were more social and spiritual spaces for single people in Glad Tidings. Because spiritual relationships took precedence over earthly relationships, early Pentecostal believers were known to abandon family and marriage obligations to dedicate their lives to Christ.⁸⁵ While the values of family life were more firmly entrenched by the 1950s, Canadian Pentecostals continued to emphasise the primacy of the individual’s relationship with God. In her oral narrative, Glad Tidings member Doris MacDonald reflected on the meanings of marriage: “None of us is perfect, so don’t look for perfection in your partner. And don’t look for happiness in your partner. Because happiness comes from the Lord, and how you feel about Him, being fulfilled as a person. You don’t get that fulfilment from the other person, it’s what your relationship is with your maker, that’s where your best self-image comes from.”⁸⁶ Pentecostal spiritual discourses, rather than the secular “cult of marriage,” shaped Doris’s understanding of her relationship with her husband as secondary to her relationship with the Lord.

In Pentecostal discourses, spiritual ties outweighed the significance of secular ties, and individuals who defied convention and stayed single remained part of a spiritual family of believers.⁸⁷

Pentecostal leaders told women that “God needs ‘old maids,’” and that it was acceptable to “be an ‘old maid’ by choice, after all it may be God’s choice. Take heart! He may have great work for you to do.”⁸⁸ Pentecostal women were warned that it “is not being single that is to be feared (some of God’s choicest saints are unmarried) but being harnessed to the wrong partner.”⁸⁹ When asked why she never married, Glad Tidings member Elma Johnson remarked: “I would never marry somebody that I didn’t love.”⁹⁰ For devout Pentecostal women, who were unwilling to be “yoked” to an unbeliever, marriage may

84 Ibid., 29.

85 Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith*, 93 and 115.

86 MacDonald, interview.

87 *Pentecostal Testimony* (January 1949): 7; (August 1949): 5. PDDB, Circular Letters, No.3, 1954. Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith*, 115; Zelma Argue, *A Vision and a Vow* (Springfield, 1940).

88 *Pentecostal Testimony* (January 1949): 13.

89 C.M. Ward, *Most Requested Radio Sermons of 1956* (Springfield, 1956), 17.

90 Johnson, interview.

have posed somewhat of a challenge. According to Edward Maxwell, the post-war congregation of Glad Tidings contained “numbers of women who never married, because they kept their standards high and wouldn’t lower their standards.”⁹¹

This paper has shown how competing views of sexual education, gender roles, marriage relations, and single people shaped these two local congregations. Despite these differences, Pentecostal and United Church officials shared in defining heterosexuality as normative. In these churches, and in the wider postwar culture, the construction of heterosexual norms depended on the definition of homosexuality as “deviant” or “abnormal.”⁹² In their oral narratives, Glad Tidings members clearly indicated that the Pentecostal Church strictly denounced homosexual behaviour.⁹³ Pentecostal leaders drew on biblical “truths” to condemn homosexuality as both sinful and unnatural. Glad Tidings member Marilyn Williams remarked that “they have a little saying for homosexuals, ‘love the sinner, but hate the sin,’ but actually, we pull our ropes pretty tight around us, and we don’t really love the sinner.”⁹⁴

While Pentecostal leaders used religious doctrine to condemn homosexuality, United Church officials pointed to the threat that homosexual relations posed to family stability. In the United Church, homosexuality was defined as a learned, deviant behaviour which “tends to undermine the foundations of stable society based upon heterosexual marriage and family responsibility.”⁹⁵ Church members were encouraged to adopt a sympathetic, Christian attitude towards individuals who carried “the burden of deviant sexual feelings.” To eradicate these “deviant” feelings, and possibly establish a “good marriage relationship,” homosexuals were urged to seek counselling and support through the church.⁹⁶ At First United, the emergence of couples’ clubs, family literature, parent workshops, marriage programs, and family camps entrenched heterosexual norms in the postwar period.⁹⁷ “Christianity,” observed one First United leader, “is a family religion. It is the Christian conviction that people are happier when they can live together in families.”⁹⁸ United Church discourses and practices marginalised alternative sexualities by defining nuclear family life, based on married heterosexuality, as the primary form of social organisation.

91 Maxwell, interview.

92 Adams, *The Trouble With Normal*.

93 Williams, interview; Johnson, interview; Maxwell, interview; Peterson, interview.

94 Williams, interview.

95 UBCE, *Sex, Love, Marriage*, 15.

96 *Ibid.*, 16.

97 FUA, *Bulletins*, 28 October 1956; 29 November 1957; 11 May 1958. FUA, United Church Women collection, Letters, 1961.

98 FUA, *Bulletins*, 4 May 1952.

In both Glad Tidings and First United, the value attached to heterosexual relationships – in young people’s groups, couples’ clubs, denominational literature, and sermons – meant that even though homosexuality was rarely discussed, it was widely understood as abnormal. Mary Louise Adams’ concept of “normalisation” is useful here. The process of normalisation, she argues, prevents deviance, limits choices, and makes it difficult to imagine different ways of being.⁹⁹ Through a range of practices, heterosexuality was made an important key to social belonging and acceptance in these churches, and in the larger postwar culture. Within this context, it would indeed have been difficult for church members to accept and affirm alternative sexualities. This paper has focused on the construction of heterosexual norms, but it tells us less about those who were marginalised by such norms. Did homosexuals view postwar churches as unwelcome or hostile places? Or did they find a level of spiritual acceptance in particular religions, such as those which emphasised equality among all believers? How did those who were defined as sexually “deviant” resist or reshape such definitions? Although they pose methodological challenges, these questions certainly deserve the attention of future researchers.

This paper has shown that postwar ideals of gender, sexuality, and the family were reproduced not only in secular newspapers, classrooms, and courtrooms, but in religious literature, church groups, and Sunday sermons. Historians have presumed that social reform, psychology, and other secular institutions were more significant than churches in defining postwar sexual norms. Far from supplanting religion, secular or “expert” discourses on sexuality intersected with Christian values in First United, and remained largely irrelevant in Glad Tidings. Through this period, the United Church reinforced the importance of family life by starting sexual education programs, marriage courses, and couples’ clubs. Rather than simply enforcing a singular or “traditional” version of heterosexual gender relations, however, these initiatives contributed to the emerging tensions between gender separation and mutuality in marriage. In Glad Tidings, church leaders imposed rigid dating restrictions on young people, shunned sexual education, and rejected “modern” forms of family organisation. While Pentecostal officials upheld conventional “family values,” they also insisted that the individual’s relationship with God take precedence over family relationships. By accepting single people into a larger spiritual “family of believers,” and by defining the relationship between wives and husbands as secondary, Pentecostal religion subtly challenged the secular, postwar “cult of marriage.” Clearly, these churches were not simply bastions of unchanging values and norms, but rather dynamic places where the meanings of sexuality, gender, and the family were made, affirmed, and challenged. By

99 Adams, *The Trouble with Normal*, 13.

focusing on these dynamic places, and taking the category of religion seriously, future researchers will generate new insights into the multiple and complex ways in which postwar women and men made sense of themselves and their relationships.