

Margaret Avison and Knox Church, 1963-2000

by Don MacLeod

“Do you know the joy of knowing the Lord Jesus?” Margaret Avison was asked one day in the early 1960s by someone she described as a “radiant” Christian. At that time she was working as a research assistant to Kathleen Coburn of Victoria College. Margaret’s reply was short and terse: “I know the theory. And, as you can see, I am busy” (*I Am Here* 140). But then she relented, decided to be kind, and accepted a piece of paper with the name and address of the nearby Knox Presbyterian Church and the time of their services. Knox was not your typical Canadian Presbyterian Church. In many ways its ethos more resembled the fervour of her Methodist maternal grandfather, whose heart like John Wesley’s had been “strangely warmed.” He had arrived at Central Church Calgary parsonage after his wife’s death when Margaret was eight years old. He was the first to talk to Margaret about personal faith.

Margaret’s initial reaction to worship at Knox was not positive. As she left, walking down the church steps, she said to no one in particular, “I keep hearing about faith in there. You people have it. I don’t. What am I supposed to do?” (*I Am Here* 141) A congregant who overheard her outburst told her to go to Knox’s minister, Dr. William Fitch. Fitch, a compelling Scottish pulpit spell-binder, counselled her to read the Gospel of John every morning before going to work. Her encounter with Jesus, as she later called it, came reading the opening of the fourteenth chapter of John as Jesus says “You believe in God, believe also in me.” That Friday morning, 4 January 1963, she had a religious epiphany which shaped the rest of her life. It was a *Dumbfounding*, which became her most famous poem describing her own faith discovery:

where, the outcast’s outcast, you
sound dark’s uttermost, strangely light-brimming, until
time be full.

(AN 1.198)

That dumbfounding brought on her famous declaration: “I’ll believe, but don’t take the poetry. It’s all I’ve got left.” And then throwing the Bible

across the room she conceded defeat: "Okay, Take the poetry too!" (*I Am Here* 142).

The renunciation of poetry she offered God on that occasion suggests that Knox Church was ambivalent about the value of her verse. Fundamentalists were in full retreat from the culture, even though the church was right across from Canada's most significant institution of post-secondary education. Though they basked in Margaret's increasing fame as "our poet," congregants struggled with her verse, finding it less accessible and "spiritual" than, for example, that of "the other Margaret" at Knox Church, the well-known hymn writer Margaret Clarkson. Clarkson had achieved fame among evangelicals as the author of the hymn "So Send I You" (which she later regretted). Margaret Clarkson was acerbic, opinionated, and troubled. It is to Avison's credit that the two maintained a friendly but distant relationship.

When in 1909 Knox Church left the downtown property it had held since 1819, it attempted to maintain a presence in the city core by opening a mission on Queen St. East, originally a jewellery store run by a Knox elder and then bequeathed to the congregation. Lease rents from the original property and denominational grants paid the staff, and the elders of Knox, through a committee, sometimes maintained a supervisory role. Margaret had been helping out at the Mission for several years on a volunteer basis, but in 1968 she was approached to join the paid staff there under the Director, Rev. George Cunningham, for whom she had a high regard. Her four years at the Mission were productive and useful. She had an extraordinary ability to relate to people of all strata of society but particularly those down and out.

Unfortunately Margaret was caught up in the politics of Knox Church which at times could be very vicious. Dr. Fitch and Rev. Cunningham had a falling out, and it became very emotional and distracting, Dr. Fitch had become erratic and unpredictable and treated Cunningham as his private employee. George Cunningham was unwilling to take that role and had a temper. By 1972, as Fitch's ministry at Knox was coming to an unhappy end, the conflict became polarizing. For Margaret, caught in the middle between two men both of whom she admired and respected as persons of faith, it was disillusioning and she became suicidal. The upshot of the whole debacle was that Knox Church lost its role in shaping Evangel Hall which was rapidly secularized. Margaret was distraught, particularly as the congregation that had brought her to faith was in an unhappy and polarized state.

She moved to London, Ontario, as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario for the academic year of 1972-73, leaving the stress behind her. It was a Knox member, Joan Eichner, whose friendship helped restore Margaret and for the rest of her life provided the strong emotional support that she required to function. Another stabilizing factor was the presence of George Lowe as assistant minister on the Knox staff. George had been hired in 1966, qualifying because of his proven loyalty to the senior pastor in all cases and, thanks to his administrative skill, pastoral gifts with older women, and encyclopaedic knowledge of the congregation, became her friend and support.

In 1978 a new programme was started at Knox Church, and Margaret and Joan Eichner were enlisted. Visitation Evangelism (“VE”) became an important part of her life. Imported from Cincinnati’s College Hill Church, it featured a closely coordinated programme starting with friendship pads passed along the pews during worship services in which all were asked to sign their name and address, unthinkable thirty years later with privacy regulations. The pads were then collected, given to Joan Eichner as secretary of the ministry, scrutinised by George Lowe and myself (I joined staff in 1980), and then names we chose sent on to Margaret who contacted them by phone to set up a visit on a Tuesday evening by members of the Visitation Evangelism team.

These phone calls were a remarkable demonstration of Margaret’s empathy and insight into human nature. Rarely would anyone turn her down. She established an emotional bond which made the subsequent visit usually fruitful and productive, sometimes leading to conversions to Christianity. It was all part of her philosophy of dealing with people who did not share her faith commitment. In 1972, at the end of her Evangel Hall experience and possibly as a result of it, she determined that the best approach was not we/them but all of us together.

The title of her autobiography written years later, said it all: *I Am Here and Not Not-There*. She was indeed there with you, and not anywhere else. That sensitivity in her poetry to human emotion as she “connected” to the reader was honed during the telephone conversations she had with those who signed the pad. She never made people feel vulnerable or exposed. You felt that Margaret Avison was right there with you. The descriptions in her autobiography of her VE visits may take up too many pages, but they provide endless insights as to what made her poetry sing.

None she contacted, of course, had any idea who this woman was. Her identity as one of Canada’s leading literary figures was kept very quiet. The Tuesday in 1985 after she received her medal for the Order of Canada

she arrived with it in a brown paper bag and seemed to have almost a school girl's delight in showing a new toy.

Margaret's much loved poem "For Dr. and Mrs. Dresser" (*AN* 1.204-5), written following the 1966 Knox Missionary Conference, reflects this essential aspect of Knox identity. The heroism of this couple is highlighted by the grubs they were expected to eat in order to share in the sacramental grace of table fellowship and thus emulating the Master. Her enthusiasm for such a life of self-sacrifice prepared her for what lay ahead as she received an invitation to work on behalf of a tribal mission in Asia. Following an interview in 1978 by Knox Trustee A. J. Stewart, she was hired by the Mustard Seed Mission. The Mission, which focussed on aboriginals in Taiwan and Kalimantan, had been founded by Knox missionary Lillian Dickson. Dickson, as a foreign missionary, was welcomed in the Knox pulpit, otherwise a place strictly off limits to any non-missionary female. In spite of Stewart's initial concern that poets were not organized, a strong bond was established between Margaret, his wife Addy, and Stewart, one of the movers and shakers of Knox Church. Organized, disciplined, meticulous in all financial dealings and receipting, Margaret proved an indispensable link between donors and Pacific tribal outreach. As a Board member and a co-occupant of her small office up over a doughnut shop at Yonge and Eglinton, I can testify to her infinite compassion with every small or big donor. She treated them all as family and was superb in her dealings with the Dicksons, mother and daughter, no easy task. Donors all felt they knew Margaret personally through her correspondence. She flawlessly organized travel and speaking engagements. As Board members we were grateful for the way she navigated the shoals.

Then it was all over. She retired from Mustard Seed in 1986. A year later I left Knox Church for a congregation in Boston. Margaret and Joan came down to my induction, writing a poem as they returned by Greyhound bus through the Berkshires on their way home. Her "Godspeed" (*AN* 2.215) expresses, as only she could, the frustrations and joys of urban parish ministry. The honorary degrees, the recognitions, piled up but as VE ground to a halt and Knox Church went through continuing crises in leadership and direction, Margaret began to lose heart.

She had moved in 1984 to a seniors' residence, Fellowship Towers, near Yonge and Bloor, where she kept an eagle eye out for my parents who lived there also. She took the Knox van morning and evening to services. Faithful Joan Eichner, caring to the end, eased her way in her final years. When John Vissers left Knox in 2000 after a difficult and challenging five years as senior minister, she and Joan finally departed, identifying with the

chaplaincy at Fellowship Towers who conducted her beautifully pre-planned funeral liturgy following her death on 31 July 2007.

The final Scripture she chose for her funeral (and read to her on her deathbed) was appropriately from John 17.26, Jesus' words: "I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."