

Dr. Robert McClure New Moderator of the United Church (1969)

The 23rd General Assembly of the United Church of Canada held in Kingston, Ontario made the headlines when Dr. Robert McClure was elected as the new moderator. This was the first time that a layman has been chosen as the leader of the United Church. When one thinks of a moderator of a denomination, or a president of a synod, one thinks of a person who has dedicated his life to theological studies and to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here, however, we find someone who has devoted his life to medicine, specializing in orthopedics and leprosy. This is very wonderful and he being the son of a medical missionary who is in China. It would be hard to find someone else who has been involved in and surrounded with medical missionary work as long as Dr. McClure. Though but sixty-eight years old, he has already had forty-five years of medical experience in countries such as China, handling a fleet of ambulances on the Burma Road, four years with the Arabs in the Gaza strip, and he has headed the Ratlam Christian Hospital in India for fourteen years. (1) Besides being a hospital administrator he performed over a thousand operations a year, "ranging from brain surgery to wart removals." (2) No doubt, he had to do much improvising on his instruments and techniques, and his working conditions were less efficient than what we would find in our modern Canadian hospitals. All this required utmost patience and extra skill and tolerance to work for such a length of time. Therefore, no one deserves a retirement as much as Dr. McClure.

Instead, Dr. McClure faces a completely different role in life from which he has been accustomed. The Canadian public began to take notice of him several years ago when a T.V. program was shown concerning his medical work in India. Since his election as moderator, he has been interviewed on the C.B.C. network broadcasts and by a Toronto journalist and author, Allan Spraggatt. Now that he has been elected as the "spiritual leader" of the church, one wonders what his beliefs are. Dr. McClure describes himself as a 'foxhole Christian, not an office Christian.' (3) From what he plans to do for the next few years, he appears to be a man of action rather than one bogged down with all kinds of office work. The question is, What does he actually believe? To him, God reveals Himself in "a piece of bread given to a hungry child," (4) and "in the form of an orthopedic department in a rehabilitation centre." (5) In his broadcast interview, he was very hesitant to say what he believed about heaven, hell and immortality. Resurrection to him means the continuity of the spirit from generation to generation. (6)

No reference was made Jesus Christ in this interview. Dr. McClure very strongly supports church union, i.e., union of the United Church with the Anglican Church. "Denominationalism is all out of date, and he hopes to have union in 5 years." (7) Ten years ago, he had very little tolerance for those who had different religious views. Now, he describes the United Church as a "big umbrella to include everyone with different religious thoughts and shade. This is a marvelous piece of art." (8) Prayer means very much to him, as it is the time of meditation and trying to find "God's" will for him. His creed is simple. "The God I worship is the God of love; and second, the God I worship is the God and Father of all men." (9) At one time, when he was vice-president of the Christian Medical Association of India, he was invited to a special

meeting of medical missionaries and theologians in Germany to study the theology of medical missionaries. He described the necessity of this meeting as "being all 'bunk.'" (10)

One cannot help noticing from the broadcasts and written interviews just how deeply concerned he is about the political and social problems of the world. This is only natural, as he has been involved with grave hunger problems as seen in India and China. About these problems, we find that the new moderator has definite views, which have been influenced by the Eastern cultures. He advocates teen-age marriages, like what he has seen in India, and he believes that an arranged marriage would be an improvement over the present type of courtship we have here in Canada. (11) Dr. McClure strongly favours abortion. "No unwanted child should come into the world." (12) He would like to have the divorce laws widened, for the same reason as amputation. "The treatment of a crippled limb is to try to salvage that limb. But when the limb has gone gangrenous, you had better amputate, or you will lose the life. The real challenge is not whether you believe in divorce, but what is the church doing for the breakdown in marriage and family life in Canada?" (13) He is not so much interested in the statistics of the church, as he is in the role of the church: "facing up to its responsibility in an affluent country with the problems of hunger." How is one to distribute 650-700 million bushels of wheat? How does one help the suffering in Biafra, and provide homes for unmarried mothers and the aged?

In the next 2 years, we can expect to hear more of Dr. McClure as moderator, not on subjects of theology, but on matters of politics and sociology. His elected position will be full time, in comparison with the former moderators who also had a second position of being a minister. He refuses to accept the substantial salary of \$17,000.-; instead he wants to travel and live on the pension provided by the Board of World Missions. His itinerary includes a tour of the Western provinces and B.C., and tours in Ontario. No doubt he will be interviewed many times by the press, radio and T.V., and he will be in demand as a guest speaker at Doctors' and nurses' functions. Dr. McClure believes that the administration of the presbytery needs an overhaul. "We need new machinery, so we can take prompt action. I am a great believer in decisions. The wrong decision is better than the right decision too late." (14) With this attitude, it will be interesting to follow through the role of Robert McClure as the first lay moderator of the United Church of Canada.

Mrs. Helen Tangelder.
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