



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Walter Unger: Passionate Pilgrim Teacher

Walter Unger was a principled disciple of Jesus Christ who left a large footprint as a teacher, writer, churchman, theologian, and president of Columbia Bible College, in Abbotsford, British Columbia. He strove valiantly to understand the world in which he lived and to passionately engage it with fellow pilgrims for the glory of God.

Born in 1936, Walter grew up in St. Catharines, Ontario. Little could he have known how deeply the psyche of this pioneer church would reach into his life. The Ontario Mennonite Brethren Conference was organized in 1932. For the first several decades, only a few issues dominated its agenda. One was the establishment of a Bible school in 1938. Later, an extension of the Bible school, Eden High School (later Eden Christian College), began in 1945. At the same time, concern for evangelistic outreach animated Ontario MBs, resulting in the establishment of a vigorous program of Daily Vacation Bible Schools, which in turn resulted in the formation of new MB congregations in southern Ontario.

There is little doubt that Walter sensed a spiritual calling early in his life. For young Canadian MBs considering ministry, the national training centre during the 1950s was the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg. The years Walter studied at MBBC shaped his interests and calling in definable

ways. Walter admired President John A. Toews who was a historian, with an earned doctorate. From Toews, Walter absorbed not only a love of history but also a seasoned understanding of his Anabaptist heritage. It was Professor David Ewert, an expert in biblical languages, who taught Walter to love the Bible and biblical hermeneutics, indispensable tools that Walter would further hone and use extensively in his own teaching and preaching.

After 10 years of school teaching, in 1968, he enrolled in an MA program in Church History and Christian Thought at the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. His MA thesis examined the social views of 19th-century revivalist Charles Finney. It would be hard to overstate how deeply Finney's convictions and contributions became rooted in Walter's consciousness. Finney abhorred "a piety that had no humanity in it." From this study, Walter concluded

that Finney did not preach a social gospel but a gospel with "definite, practical social implications."

While teaching at Columbia Bible Institute, Walter undertook PhD studies at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia. His doctoral dissertation was entitled, "Earnestly Contending for the Faith: The Role of the Niagara Bible Conference in the



Walter Unger (1936–2018)

Emergence of American Fundamentalism, 1875–1900.” This thorough study of the Niagara Bible Conference equipped Walter to understand the fundamentalist/evangelical tradition that still shapes North American Christianity in significant ways.

Inside and outside of the MB church, Walter came to be known for his prolific writings that have appeared in some 20 journals and magazines, principally the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*. Over a span of 40 years, he submitted approximately 300 entries that forcefully exposed shallow arguments that masqueraded as intellectualism, tersely noting: “Although it is true that faith can be established in the heart by faith alone, it is absurd to assume that faith can precede reason” (*MBH* 16 October 1970).

As a long-serving member of the Board of Faith and Life, he was vitally involved in articulating core beliefs and practices for MBs.

At the time of Walter’s faculty appointment at Columbia Bible Institute in 1969, discussions were underway to unite two Abbotsford area Bible schools, thus becoming the first inter-Mennonite (MC and MB) Bible institute in North America, promoting an evangelical Anabaptist theology.

One of Walter’s great gifts to Columbia was to administer the school with a consistent, lucid vision, resulting in handsome dividends. The first stage along this arduous journey was to convince the two supporting constituencies that a two-year curriculum was no longer a viable educational model. Owing in large measure to Walter’s fervent advocacy at the 1985 annual meeting, delegates agreed to such a far-reaching decision, resulting in the birth of Columbia Bible College.

A second major hurdle for CBC involved the political process of applying for a legal charter, allowing the college to grant baccalaureate degrees. This goal was accomplished in June 1987 when the British Columbia Legislative Assembly passed the “Columbia Bible College Act.” A natural sequence was the securing of full accreditation with the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges, which was awarded to Columbia in October 1991.

For Walter, daily journaling was a “spiritual lifeline.” In one of his “Christian Mind” columns (*MBH* 12 January 1990), he allowed that the more than 30 years of journaling was “an excellent means of tracking the inner journey.” At its core, journaling was a means of critical self-examination, of setting priorities and goals, of highlighting insights from his reading, and, perhaps most importantly for him, of seizing a “God-sized perspective of things.” These values inspired his teaching and preaching, always a passionate engagement for him.

Family life was at the core of Walter’s being. On 27 August 1960, he married Laura Redekopp, who was a soul mate and sounding board for him. Together they raised three children. He found his relaxation in reading, good theater, travel, and participating in sports. Walter died at the age of 81 on 9 May 2018.

Was Walter Unger a saint? Perhaps a curious question inside an MB ethos. American churchman William Crowell Doane taught that sainthood was achieved by “struggle and suffering” and by “clean hands and a pure heart” in service to others for the glory of God. By this measure, Walter Unger can be added to the list, a passionate pilgrim teacher.



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