

A History of Philpott Memorial Church

Part I: In the Beginning...

In October, 1892, Pastor P. W. Philpott first came to Hamilton. With a group of former officers of the Salvation Army like himself, they rented a hall on the northeast corner of King and MacNab Streets (now Jackson Square) and established the Hamilton Christian Workers' Mission (CWM). Hamilton was as diverse in those days as it is today, and the Mission was particularly effective at communicating the Gospel with the working class – and especially men.



Hamilton Farmers' Market. James St. North. c.1913

For its first few months, the Mission was led by Mr. James Desson of Toronto. Desson was succeeded by Dr. Herbert McKenzie, a young businessman in Toronto. His ministry was a great blessing, and many of those who would later become the great missionaries of the Philpott Tabernacle were led to Christ under McKenzie's ministry. In early 1896 he left Hamilton amidst an unknown controversy for a church in London, Ontario. His successor, a Mr. Gurney, struggled for several months as pastor, and the Mission barely survived. It went deep into debt, and included only about 35 members.

It was into this setting that Pastor and Mrs. Philpott returned in 1896 – to help out for a few weeks (or so they thought), to straighten out the finances and secure a new leader. During this second round of ministry in Hamilton, God blessed the Hamilton CWM in wonderful ways: crowds gathered and numerous professions of faith in Christ were made. The debt was paid and the future looked bright. All those involved with the work insisted that Pastor Philpott should remain at least a few months longer, as it seemed that a genuine revival was happening.

Part II: About P.W. Philpott

Peter Wiley Philpott was a working-class man: an underemployed blacksmith, construction worker and labourer. In 1884 at the age of eighteen, and while living with his widowed mother, he accepted Christ at a street meeting of a Salvation Army band in Dresden, Ontario. A young woman was with them, singing *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*. He retold the event in countless sermons, saying:

Without a thought of God in my heart, I passed a street meeting where a little woman was standing on a box, singing. She had a wonderful voice, and in her heart there had been shed abroad the love of God. Oh, how sweetly she sang!

...There was a refrain: "O Calvary, dark Calvary, speak to some heart from Calvary." God answered the prayer of that hymn and spoke to me then and there. Like John Newton:

My conscience felt and owned the guilt and plunged me in despair;

I saw my sins His blood had spilt and helped to nail Him there.

That was the greatest moment of my life. I have had thousands of blessings since. My heart is full of assurance and gladness now, and I know that I shall be with Christ throughout eternity; but the beginning of it all was the vision of the cross and the realization that Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, died for me.



Peter Wiley Philpott



Jessie Philpott, P.W.'s wife as a former Officer in the Salvation Army. She led many prayer meetings and Bible studies for the Mission.

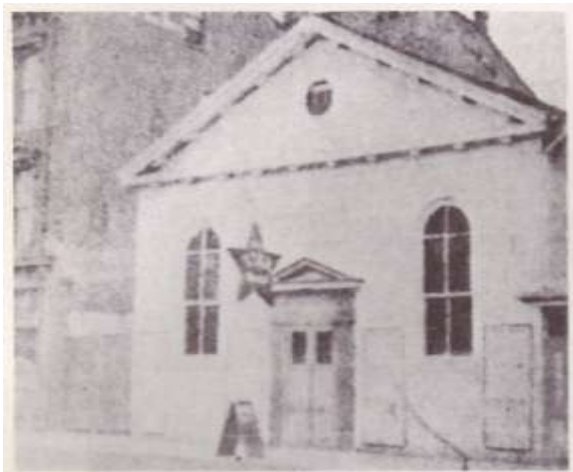
Almost overnight, Philpott became an evangelist, preaching the Gospel on the street at every opportunity, and soon was made an officer in the Salvation Army. He married Jessie Menzies, a fellow Salvation Army Officer who had served with Philpott in London, Kingston, and Toronto. When they finally left the Army in 1892 and started the Hamilton Mission, it was one among a loose association of congregations that eventually would comprise the Associated Gospel Churches of Canada.

There was much work to do in Hamilton, and many who still needed to hear the Good News of Jesus. Though his gifts and passion would later take him to California and around the world, he had no ambition for fame or glory. When he agreed to return to Hamilton in 1896, he did so believing that this was "...the unselfish path, for there is nothing very inviting about Hamilton." His message was "that of the New Testament: To save souls, to help the poor, look after people who never attend the house of God, visit the sick, lend a helping hand to a brother in distress..."

At one point in his ministry, Philpott was called upon to bring comfort and hope to a dying prostitute in a downtown brothel; he did so and before she died, she and many others became followers of Jesus. Philpott was loved and trusted by many; people who shared his irreligious, blue-collar upbringing could see a Christianity that wasn't just talk, or dogma, but which was real, true, and good for the world.

Part III: From Christian Workers' Mission to Philpott Memorial Church

The first years of Philpott's ministry with the Mission took place in the St. James Hotel on



The old Star Theatre on Merrick St. (Now York Blvd) was a Burlesque house in the early 1900's, and was rented for worship services by the Mission until they built a hall in 1901.

Hughson Street, near King William (exact location unknown), where monthly rent was \$20. After a year, the Mission outgrew this, and moved to a hall on a third floor on James Street South, near Main St. (exact location unknown) where the rent was \$250 per year. This room held about 300, but from the start, people had to be turned away. A larger space was sought and Philpott was able to secure the use of MacNab Street Baptist Church, (then vacant, now a parking lot), at MacNab Street North, near Cannon in 1898. This spot also proved too small and Sunday evening services were held in what was then known as the old Star Theatre on Merrick St., which seated about 1000 people. Each Sunday night great crowds gathered there and many decisions were made for Christ. Though the evening services seemed to outgrow location after location, open-air meetings were held in Gore Park each Sunday morning during the summer

months.

A real step of faith was made when the property at Park and Merrick (later renamed *York Blvd*) was purchased in 1901 by the congregation for \$2,500. Construction costs were approximately \$6,000. With the new building came a name change: the Christian Workers' Chapel. For about two years the services were held in its largest room (which now is divided among PMC's Hub, Nursery, and Missionary Hall). It was always packed to the doors, and hundreds more professed faith in Christ there.

The next big step of faith was taken in 1906, with the construction of the Chapel's \$30,000

major addition. It was a remarkable move for a congregation among whose membership was no one of wealth or privilege. The only funds available were the sacrificial giving of the common people and loans from the members secured by trustee notes. The church was renamed The Gospel Tabernacle, and its new auditorium held about 1,200. Each week, the building was used for various ministries, prayer meetings, and Bible classes. Philpott's ministry in Hamilton continued this way for 26 years until 1922, when he was called to Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, Illinois. But before he left, they had again outgrown their location – Philpott was preaching to some 3,000 working-class people at the Loew's Theatre (now the abandoned *Buttinsky's Bar* on King St.) each week.

At about the same time, the Christian Workers' Association – of which the Hamilton CWM was a part – became an official denomination. In 1925 they became known as the Associated Gospel Churches of Canada (AGC).

During the ministry of Dr. Louis Talbot, the church became known as The Philpott Tabernacle in 1926 in honor of Dr. Philpott's ministry. Upon Dr. Philpott's death in 1957, the church was again renamed as Philpott Memorial Church. In 1969 a kitchen, gymnasium, chapel, offices, and Sunday School rooms were added.

Other renovations and change have been made to the interior and exterior over the years due to ministry needs. Yet while we praise God for a building in which to minister the Gospel to the religious and irreligious of Hamilton, as the history of PMC shows, it's not with the *building* that this congregation's allegiances belong, but with the *person* and the *mission* of Jesus Christ. We bless God for the legacy of Gospel faithfulness that has been passed down by P.W. Philpott, and all those like him who served the Lord here in Hamilton by introducing lost people to Jesus Christ.

[Note: for a more scholarly and comprehensive discussion of the early days of the Hamilton CWM, and a consideration of Philpott's effectiveness as a pastor to the working class, see Draper, Kenneth L., "A People's Religion: P.W. Philpot and the Hamilton Christian Workers' Church". *Online:*

<http://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/hssh/article/view/4438> (last accessed May, 2011)]



The Christian Workers' Chapel interior. This space, formerly called The Lecture Hall, is currently used for The Hub, the Nursery, and upstairs Missionary Hall.



The Gospel Tabernacle renamed "Philpott Tabernacle" in 1926 by Pastor Louis Talbot. Note the sign, which reads: "JESUS SAVES"



The interior of the Loew's Theatre, later renamed The Capitol. Today the building is unused, but P.W. Philpott preached the Gospel there to some 3,000 Hamiltonians every Sunday evening