

Something from our Canadian Presbyterian History

Having been mentioned a couple of times by the Rev. Will Ingram who is with a team of Canadian Presbyterians who have joined with The Presbyterian Church of Trinidad and Tobago in the PCTT's 150th anniversary celebration, I provide a brief history of John and Susan Morton's connection with Trinidad.

John Morton had a successful ministry in the 1860s in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, until he developed serious throat problems, possibly diphtheria. Morton's doctor ordered rest and an extended trip to the Caribbean. Morton went to Trinidad in 1865. During the previous three decades, Trinidad's economy had fundamentally changed – the end of Black slavery caused plantation owners to turn to the Indian sub-continent for labour, offering a form of indentured servitude. Thousands of Indians took up the opportunity to make money in Trinidad over five years and then get a free trip home.

When Morton visited the island, he noticed no church group was seeking to reach the Indians on the plantations with the good news of Jesus. American Presbyterians were working among the Black population, and Christian work was being done among the Indigenous community – but no work among the Indians. When Morton returned to Nova Scotia and his congregation, he tried first to convince the Church of Scotland and then American Presbyterians to respond to the mission call. Neither responded. Thus in 1868, with the blessing of the Synod of the Maritimes, John and Susan Morton and their family became missionaries to the Indian community in Trinidad.

His vision was clear. Trinidad was close to Nova Scotia with a regular trade between them; it was only natural for a Maritime church to take on this mission. Second, the mission would be education-based. The Indian labourers were expected to return to India and those who had become followers of Jesus would need the training and tools to carry the good news back to India. Which led to the third piece: the mission would be in Hindi. The missionaries would learn Hindi, because the Indian Christians, when they returned to India, would speak Hindi – teaching the Indian labourers English would not advance the spread of the gospel. Morton became proficient in Hindi, being able to preach in Hindi and playing a lead role in creating a Hindi catechism.

The demands for schools out-stripped the number of missionaries, who turned to training Indians as teachers. This too fit the ministry model. The missionaries were not going to take the gospel to India, but instead, those they trained. The significance of the Indian teachers is evidenced in the Trinidad mission's reports to General Assembly, where the names of the Indian teachers are included as part of the mission staff (this was the only Canadian Presbyterian mission to be this clear about the partnerships formed across cultural lines). Further, the Rev. Lal Bahari, an Indian, had his reports published in the Acts & Proceedings.

Through the missionaries serving in Trinidad, Canadian Presbyterians learned about Muslims – for the indentured labourers were not just Hindus, there were also Muslims among the group. The Trinidadian mission is an example of a mission call being heard and responded to with an intentional mission plan. Further, it highlights how a globalizing world creates unexpected mission opportunities.

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