CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN MISSIONS BECAME DEVELOPMENT: IRONIES OF 'NGOIZATION' IN MAINSTREAM CANADIAN CHURCHES IN THE 1960S*

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In the small high school that I attended in Atlantic Canada my friendly competitor for good grades was a girl very different from my self-absorbed teenage self, someone whose all-round seriousness and involvement with church work led some of us to understand that, like her Uncle Roy, she would become a United Church of Canada missionary. Instead, in 1966, after graduating from Mount Allison University with arts and education degrees and teaching for a year in Labrador, my friend joined CUSO. Originally called Canadian University Service Overseas, CUSO was established in 1961, the same year as the Peace Corps. The first distinctively Canadian non-governmental organization (NGO) to undertake development work from a secular stance and in post-colonial and decolonizing contexts, CUSO sent volunteers to some forty countries during its first decade.1 In my friend’s case, the destination was Kenya.

Had she joined CUSO out of frustration with a church hidebound by missionary traditionalism and out of touch with the mood of the times? Almost certainly not.2 During the 1960s, the United Nations Development Decade,3 Canada’s mainstream churches made a significant break with their missionary past, espousing numerous causes that fit comfortably under the rubric of development. The shift was most

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1 Bill McWhinney and Dave Godfrey, eds., Man Deserves Man: CUSO in Developing Countries (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968), and Ian Smillie, The Land of Lost Content: A History of CUSO (Toronto: Deneau, 1985) are valuable insider accounts.

2 My friend died before I began the research on cuso that led to this article. Her family provided generous access to her letters and diaries.

pronounced in the United Church of Canada, the largest and most liberal of Canada's Protestant denominations, founded in 1925. This article highlights changes in organization, discourse, and practice that characterized the missions-to-development trajectory in the United Church during the 1960s and some of the ironies that arose from those changes. Despite the church's decidedly non-evangelistic approach to missions in this decade, globally minded young Canadians were not won over: they overwhelmingly chose to express their interest in development work through secular organizations like CUSO, even when, like my friend, they had had a traditional church upbringing and sometimes youthful dreams of a missionary career. Yet, even if it had won their loyalty, the United Church could not have accommodated them, given a decline in the funds available to sponsor mission personnel and the church's new policy of sending its workers to overseas placements only when and where they had been invited. Indeed, when circumstances brought development-minded volunteers their way as would-be missionaries, the church's missions officials frequently referred them to organizations like CUSO, viewing such organizations as acceptable alternatives for expressing a Christian compassion in the developing world. This perspective was not reciprocated. CUSO's organizers were prepared to accept practical, start-up help from the missions community, but like the majority of their volunteers they were anxious to avoid the taint of the M word and the distasteful associations with proselytization and colonialism that it evoked.

Conversely, many conservative Canadian churchgoers in the 1960s favoured a more traditional approach to mission, and to Christianity

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