

October 20, 2009

Ottawa*Watch* 244: The truth, well told

By Lloyd Mackey

The reference, at the end of this piece, to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, is intriguing. Today, most of its churches take the Community of Christ moniker, in part to prevent people from confusing it with the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints, often described by outsiders as Mormon. I have not come across the Community of Christ very often, but it was present in some strength in Chilliwack when I was a reporter and editor there in the 60s and 70s. The city mayor, the fire chief and the owner of one of the major food stores were all part of that congregation. They could pass for mainstream evangelical Christians in most respects, except they viewed the Book of Mormon as an important element in their written sacred guidance.

Jack Cowie was a very good advertising sales person for the *The Province*, Vancouver's tabloid newspaper, back in the late 60s.

I was a young fellow with a Bible college education and a few years behind me, testing the possibility of a vocation in Christian pastoral work.

A shift in experiences and priorities took me to *The Chilliwack Progress*, in British Columbia's Fraser Valley, where I became a reporter, then, later, the editor.

But my first work with *The Progress* was in advertising and circulation sales. My publisher, Cec Hacker, held the belief that future journalists would benefit from some exposure to newspaper economics. He was right, of course.

Part of my orientation was a weekend seminar on advertising sales, conducted by Cowie who moonlit from his *Province* job by providing basic sales training for other newspaper organizations.

The title of Cowie's seminar was "The Truth, Well Told." His two self-evident points were that media advertising needed to be rooted in truth – not untruths. Further, it worked best when those truths were well told, not mumbled beneath one's breath, where no one could hear them.

But also well presented in his seminar was the point that a good sales person needed to present his or her clients with a financial rationale for including a reasonable amount of money in their advertising and promotional budgets.

Advertisers needed to spend enough to attract customers who would buy goods and services in amounts that would make it worthwhile for the business people to continue providing those goods and services into the future. But they also needed to avoid

squandering those resources by engaging in poorly executed advertising campaigns that cost a lot of money but did not produce results.

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My recall of the Jack Cowie story came back these past two weeks, as I watched the unfolding of the story of government stimulus programs and the means taken by government to advertise and promote those programs. Not to mention the means taken by opposition to focus on the advertising and promotion, in its legitimate role to hold the government's feet to the fire.

Cowie liked to talk about a four per cent figure. His point was that a successful advertising campaign for a retailer needed to settle on a percentage of total expected sales. Four per cent was the figure he used. That meant that if the sales expected to provide breakeven and a reasonable return on investment were, say, \$1 million, then the business person would be wise to consider spending \$40,000 to achieve that goal, other factors being equal.

It goes almost without saying, that some campaigns, like those to sell diamonds, might require a larger budget and others, to sell groceries would involve relatively less, for reasons that would take a whole marketing course to work out.

In the case of the stimulus program, known as "Canada's Economic Action Plan (CEAP)", some figures have shown a spending of \$100 million or so to publicize and motivate a stimulus plan that runs well into 11 figures – a whole lot of billions.

The principle at work, here, is that the stimulus would not have worked its way through the economy in the way that it should have, without that \$100 million or so in advertising.

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That, then, covers the "well told" side of the equation.

What about the ethical question – the matter of sticking to "The truth"?

The point was made by the opposition that some of the promotion of the CEAP involved the long time practice of using "big cheques" that made easy work for media photographers and camera people. But at least one of these big cheques included the use of a Conservative party logo, implying that the money was coming from the governing party, not the government.

The prime minister, rightly so, declared that practice to be unethical. For one thing, it could be argued that it was not quite the truth, and a government that was elected in part on an accountability platform should be aware of that.

More acceptable is the practice of putting “Government of Canada” on the big cheques. After all, CEAP is part of the budget passed by the government earlier this year.

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But, just a darn minute. Who passed that budget in a minority parliament? Why, Parliament, of course. CEAP could not have happened without opposition compliance. True, the governing party shaped the budget. Whether the opposition contributed some ideas, we can’t know, because we don’t know what kinds of collaboration went on behind closed doors. Certainly, the stance of the opposition leader was that the prime minister should do his own work. Michael Ignatieff has no intention, apparently, of putting forward his own ideas until he replaces Stephen Harper as prime minister.

The prime minister jumped on that point when he made a CEAP presentation to the Toronto library system, in the middle of one of the remaining Liberal enclaves.

Harper planted the idea that, if opposition ridings do not have more stimulus projects, it might be for one or both of two reasons. Opposition members might not have worked hard enough to get business and political leaders in their own ridings to propose stimulus projects. Or they might not have been willing to publicize programs with Government of Canada written on the “big cheques”.

Such avoidance is understandable in a minority parliament, especially during a period when it appears that the governing party is on the ascendancy in the polls. There is really little language available to encourage the kind of collaboration between the governing and opposing parties, in the interests of telling the truth well.

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All of which reminds me of the biblical parable of the unjust steward. You will recall the fellow: Jesus said that he buried his one coin so that he would not lose it, rather than investing it wisely, as did his friends, who respectively had two and five coins. (The exact number of coins varies in Jesus’ telling of the parable, as recorded in different biblical gospel accounts.)

The point to be picked up by the opposition MPs is that they should be willing to invest in the greater good, rather than burying their share of the coin that they helped to create by supporting the government’s budget.

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For closers, a change of subject.

This past week, the “Famous Five” Alberta women involved in the “Women are Persons” campaign were named honorary senators.

The five, Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Louise McKinney and Irene Parlby won the reversal, at the Supreme Court of Canada, of the previously held reference that failed to recognize women as “persons.” In so doing, they opened the way for women to get involved in public life. They are memorialized in a set of statues on the Parliament Building lawns.

Recently, I read an interesting account of the childhood of Agnes Macphail, entitled *Aggie’s Storm*. Author Donna Mann, who I met earlier this year at Write! Canada, the big Guelph-based Christian writers’ conference, tackled Macphail’s childhood most intriguingly, by conjecturing what the conversations between herself and her parents, siblings and school friends might have been in rural Ontario, where she grew up.

“Aggie” grew up to be the first female member of parliament and one of the two first Ontario female MPPs. At various times, she represented both the CCF (precursors to the NDP) and the United Farmers of Ontario. She was, thus, one of the early beneficiaries of the work of the Famous Five.

In her account, Donna Mann outlines the way in which she pushed the emancipatory envelop with her parents and the church of which her father was a part. That church, as it happens, was the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ, Latter Day Saints which is, today, known as the Community of Christ.

Mann hopes to write more books in this genre. While her writing is aimed at children, it is equally helpful for adults who want to try to understand faith and political issues from a child’s perspective.

Her approach requires a little promotion, which I trust will come with time.

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