Rev. Dr. Muriel M. Spurgeon Carder (1922–2023): A Canadian Baptist Renaissance Woman

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Abstract: “Renaissance Woman” is a colloquial expression for someone who excels above and beyond normal in a wide variety of tasks, and Rev. Dr. Muriel Spurgeon Carder (1922–2023) deserves that title, for she was an ordained Canadian Baptist missionary who worked in churches, schools, and hospitals in India and Canada, as well as served as a professor, New Testament scholar, Bible translator (into Telegu), and hospital chaplain. She also published academic articles on textual issues related to New Testament manuscripts, on a biblical theology of sin, as well as on issues surrounding physical and mental challenges. Her personal accomplishments are striking among Baptists in India but also her Canadian denomination, the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec (BCOQ). Carder recently passed away at the age of 100, and this research is an introduction to her life and legacy. There is much more to be explored regarding Carder, and my hope is that this brief article provides some impetus for more detailed and comprehensive research on such an iconic figure in the BCOQ. That said, this article does more than merely provide a summary of her life and legacy. It also aims at using the experience of Carder to explore some common assumptions about Canadian women in ministry, identifying when she reinforces some and undermines others. In other words, the example of Carder complexifies what can be assumed about the experience of women in the church and warns against universal generalizations surrounding their experience. In 2008, the denomination changed its name to Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ), and for the sake of simplicity and clarity, CBOQ will be used throughout this article.

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1. Introduction

“Renaissance Woman” is a colloquial expression for someone who excels above and beyond normal in a wide variety of tasks, and Rev. Dr. Muriel Spurgeon Carder (1922–2023) deserves that title, for she was an ordained Canadian Baptist missionary who worked in churches, schools, and hospitals in India and Canada, as well as served as a professor, New Testament scholar, Bible translator (into Telegu), and hospital chaplain. She also published academic articles on textual issues related to New Testament manuscripts, on a biblical theology of sin, as well as on issues surrounding physical and mental challenges. Her personal accomplishments are striking among Baptists in India but also her Canadian denomination, the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec (BCOQ). Carder recently passed away at the age of 100, and this research is an introduction to her life and legacy. There is much more to be explored regarding Carder, and my hope is that this brief article provides some impetus for more detailed and comprehensive research on such an iconic figure in the BCOQ. That said, this article does more than merely provide a summary of her life and legacy. It also aims at using the experience of Carder to explore some common assumptions about Canadian women in ministry, identifying when she reinforces some and undermines others. In other words, the example of Carder complexifies what can be assumed about the experience of women in the church and warns against universal generalizations surrounding their experience. In 2008, the denomination changed its name to Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ), and for the sake of simplicity and clarity, CBOQ will be used throughout this article.

Surprisingly, Carder is rarely mentioned in places where you would expect to find her. No mention is made of her in Harry Renfree’s standard Canadian Baptist textbook.
or in a recent edited volume on Canadian Baptist women (Bowler 2016). She does not make the pages of older and even newer Baptist histories (McBeth 1987; Bebbington 2010; Chute et al. 2015). Nor is she mentioned in Elizabeth Gillian Muir and Marilyn Färöng Whiteley’s Changing Roles of Women within the Christian Church in Canada, Joan Sangster’s Demanding Equality: One Hundred Years of Canadian Feminism, or Kathleen Steeves’ PhD dissertation “The Lived Experiences of Women in Christian Ministry in Canada” (Muir and Whiteley 1995; Sangster 2021; Steeves 2017). There is also no published journal article focused on her.

Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature on Canadian Baptist women. Esther Barnes’ chronicle of Baptist women missionaries devotes a few pages to her, (Barnes 2013) and Bruce Fawcett notes her in his dissertation on Baptist recruitment of clergy (Fawcett 2006). The most recent textbook on Canadian Baptist history and polity does reference her ordination (and that of other women as well) (Heath et al. 2022). And a more detailed and focused body of research on the experience of Canadian Baptist women is now ongoing. For instance, a recent dissertation by Taylor Murray on Caroline Holman and her lay leadership among Canadian Baptist Fundamentalists in Ontario (T. Murray 2023) and his article on Olive Clark’s tenure as faculty member at the Toronto Baptist Seminary, along with Melody Maxwell’s articles on the ordination of Maritime Baptist women, has provided a body of growing literature on the experience of Canadian Baptist women in leadership (Maxwell 2020; Maxwell 2020–2021). This work on Carder adds to this developing collection.

As for research on women and missions, there is an extensive body of literature that intersects with Carder’s missionary experience. James Elisha Taneti notes how the critical issues related to that of women and missions in India revolve around female opportunity, race, caste, and empire (Taneti 2013). He calls for a sensitive reading of sources that are quite often written by westerners, leaving silent the voices of Indian women. He also urges a sensitivity to narratives of missionary progress among Indians used as an example of western missionary prowess or “othering” portrayals of Indians as needy (and inferior) so as to justify an imperial presence. Another point noted by Taneti is the need to read conversion accounts with a critical eye for the influence of imperial and caste pressures on the conversions of women, but at the same time, take seriously the agency of Indian women who made decisions for themselves (and their families) with their own interests in mind (such as increasing their social standing in a rigid caste system). One must read Carder’s reports on her Indian experience with all those considerations in mind. Taneti and others, such as Ruth Brouwer, note how, on the home front in Canada, it is clear that women found opportunities to serve overseas in ways that they could never have found if they had remained at home in Canada (Brouwer 1990). And that certainly was the case for Carder; although, as noted below, she did not necessarily fit within a contemporary view of what constitutes a feminist. On a different note, related to that of a religious impulse for missionaries, those such as Jane Hunter look at the motives of missionaries as being a mix of a religious impulse and self-gratification, a narrative less hagiographic than perhaps other more positive and idealistic accounts of missionaries such as Carder (Hunter 1984).

Chad Bauman’s notion of Retrieval, Reconstruction, and Retheorization in the study of women is helpful for this research on Carder (Bauman 2008; O’Connor 1989). The goal is to uncover and preserve voices from the past that have become lost or ignored, to develop a fresh narrative that tells a more nuanced and accurate story of the marginalized, and to develop a more robust historiography through the development of methodologies and theoretical assumptions that further aid in the study of marginalized figures or movements. Due to the paucity of research previously carried out on Carder, the bulk of the work in this article is on recovering the life and legacy of a person that has been ignored by researchers. That said, this article does more than merely provide a summary of her life and legacy. It also aims at using the experience of Carder to explore some common assumptions about Canadian women in ministry, identifying when she reinforces some and undermines others. In other words, the example of Carder complexifies what can
be assumed about the experience of women in the church and warns against universal generalizations surrounding their experience.

The types of sources used in this research are threefold. The first type is the public record in denominational publications. Material in those sources was written for public consumption and needs to be read with that in mind. The second are the records held in the Canadian Baptist Archives at McMaster Divinity College (MDC). Those records include personal letters, denominational minutes, newspaper clippings, bulletins, sermons, letters, and various publications by Carder. There is also material in her husband’s records at the archives that are helpful. The third source of information is from an interview with Muriel Carder’s daughter Karen conducted on 10 May 2024. A fourth cluster of potential sources is unavailable at the moment. The Carder family has a handwritten autobiography of Muriel Carder that covers her early life, as well as have in their possession several handwritten diaries—both of those sources would be invaluable for further research at some time in the future.

2. Early Years

Muriel was born on 1 November 1922 in Woodford Green, Essex, England. Her father, Carey Bradford Spurgeon, was not only the son of a former Baptist missionary to India, but was also related to Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the famous British Baptist pastor of the late-nineteenth century. That stellar Baptist pedigree was cherished by Muriel, and she kept the Spurgeon name when married by adding her husband’s last name (Carder) to Spurgeon.

Her family emigrated to Canada in the post-Great War years. They arrived February 1928 and eventually settled in Waterloo, Ontario. They joined the King Street Baptist Church, Kitchener, ON in 1935, the church where she would eventually be ordained. Muriel attended McMaster University and completed a BA, Honours (1944) and BD (1947). She was the first woman in the history of McMaster to graduate with a Bachelor of Divinity. And, in that same year, she was the first woman ordained in the CBOQ, the denomination to which her local church belonged. Melody Maxwell notes how the experience of Baptist women in the 1970s–1980s seeking ordination ranged from support to discouragement (Maxwell 2020–2021); fortunately for Carder, her experience was the former as she was surrounded by a supportive cast of family, friends, professors, and clergy.

Records indicate she had a vibrant Christian faith from an early age. Her application to the Canadian Baptist Foreign Mission Board (CBOMB) provides very helpful glimpses of the young woman. She noted that her “best subjects” in school were languages (she writes on the form that she knew Latin, Greek, and French), which explains much of her focus in the following decades. What is most helpful for getting a sense of her faith is her commentary in the section requiring an explanation of her conversion, Christian experience, and fundamental doctrine of Christianity. After mentioning her experience in a “wonderful Christian home”, she wrote “When I was about twelve I began to feel that I should like to belong to Jesus and follow Him. So, one night after evening service, I knelt down beside my bed and gave myself to Jesus . . . The next Easter I was baptized and then I felt much happier”. Muriel had two calls to Christian ministry and those calls seem to fit within common elements of female calls to ministry (Steeves 2017; Boberg 2017). As Maxwell notes, such calls that were expected for those entering Baptist pastoral work could, especially for women, help the person “persist through difficult circumstances”. (Maxwell 2020–2021). A call also provided a divine imprimatur to their work. The first call came to her when she was a child, and it pressed upon her until she responded. The second call came at a time of transition and disappointment. Regarding the first call, we have some helpful details; as for the second, not much at all.

Regarding her first call related to missionary work, she stated, “Almost as far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a missionary. I remember sitting at the tea table and Daddy said, ‘You have to be specially called for that, you know.’ I felt rather set back at
that, because I did not feel as if I had been ‘specially called.’ I began looking for visions or dreams or something drastic. Nothing came, but I still wanted to be a missionary. I told my minister, Dr. Hinds, about my problem one day and he said, ‘Anybody who feels the way you do about Christ doesn’t need any more call. Then I was very happy.’”  

She reflected on how she wanted to share Jesus with people in India and wanted to respond to the hymn lyrics “who will go?” but realized at that young age, she was too young to do so. In fact, she was afraid that everyone would be converted before she was old enough to be able to go. Over time, she also questioned the necessity of going overseas when the need was great in Canada. When she started to get old enough to actually apply to be a missionary, nagging thoughts about her call returned. She wrote “Later on I had many a conflict within myself. . .that I must be sure it was God’s will and not mine that I’d be doing—-you see, I wanted to go to India so badly that I thought perhaps it was my own desire, not His will. So I prayed and thought and talked to men of God, and now I have stopped wavering and am making out this form, for I feel that He has led me by various means to apply for India. It has been a growing understanding, not a cataclysmic call”. Ultimately, it was her conviction that she “could see no other path than the road to India” that led her to apply to become a missionary (Spurgeon 1947a).

She was accepted by CBOMB as a missionary in 1947. Her becoming a missionary was not a unique event, for many precedent-setting Baptist women missionaries had been going overseas long before Muriel. What was unique, however, was her ordination. In 1929, the CBOQ had established a committee to examine the possibility of ordaining women (CBOQ 1929). The following year, a motion at Assembly to allow for women’s ordination was defeated. However, by the mid-1940s, the CBOQ was ready to act in support of such a motion. After a vigorous debate, in the summer of 1947 the CBOQ passed a motion to ordain women and Muriel Spurgeon was first on the list of potential women to be ordained.

Since their inception in the early seventeenth century, there had been a range of options for Baptist women when it came to serving in the church (Blevins 2002; Leonard 2005, Chap. 9). Being a dissenting group often led to views outside that of the mainstream churches (Gouldbourne 1997). Baptist congregational governance also left certain decisions in the hands of local churches allowing for a variety of views on pressing matters, such as roles of women in ministry (Leonard 2005, pp. 224–25). However, despite the openness among the majority to move forward with the ordination of women, there were those within the CBOQ who, for theological reasons, remained critical of the decision. One non-theological argument raised was whether a woman would have the physical strength to carry out baptism by immersion (Harkness 1947). Others inside and outside the CBOQ were also concerned about Muriel’s views on dancing at McMaster. T.T. Shields, the fundamentalist Baptist pastor at Jarvis Street Baptist, lobbed some harsh commentary towards Muriel, partly because she spoke in favor of allowing dancing at McMaster, but mainly because she had the audacity to seek ordination. One McMaster defender of Muriel who spoke at her ordination was pleased to see his own complimentary words published in the Link and Visitor in part to help counter what he believed to be Shields’ “vicious and quite untrue reports” made about Muriel.

The ordination service was conducted on 16 September 1947 at King Street Baptist Church (CBOQ 1947–1948; Ordination of Miss Muriel Spurgeon 1947). As per common Baptist practice at ordination services, Rev. Muriel Spurgeon pronounced the benediction. After a whirlwind year of graduation, ordination, and commissioning, the twenty-five-year-old Muriel was off to India to start her dream and fulfill her calling. Her ship left late December 1947 and arrived in India in early 1948. The official administrative record describing her upcoming work in India was summed up (and understated) in one word as “evangelistic”. The fact that she immediately went overseas meant that the denomination did not have to face the realities of what had just occurred, and, as Maxwell suggests, that there had been only one ordination in the denomination meant that opponents to women’s ordination were not too threatened.
3. India

Muriel spent close to three decades as a missionary in India. Her years in India included marriage to Rev. W. Gordon Carder (a fellow Baptist missionary), the adoption of two children (Kim in 1959 and Karen in 1961), as well as a wide range of missionary tasks. Interspersed in those decades were furloughs back to North America and further education. What follows is a summary of Carder’s work as a missionary.

Muriel and her husband Gordon served in a variety of locations, including Kakinada, Ramanchandrapuram, Samalkot, Pithapuram, Visakhapatnam, Rajahmundry, Tekkali, and Vuyyuru. Carder’s work included ministry in a variety of contexts. In one statement, she casually described her jobs in India as “everything from soup to nuts—managing Girl’s Boarding School, Biblewomen, Leprosy Home, Hospital Chaplain in a Government hospital, accounts, etc.” Helpful sources for obtaining a picture of her ministry in India were the annual “Letters from the Field” mailed to supporters, reports published in the *Link and Visitor*, or in the welcoming and farewell addresses associated with furlough. Muriel and her husband traveled extensively throughout India by train or car to churches, denominational meetings, academic conferences, training retreats, schools, and theological colleges. Special church services were on the agenda, as were visits to hospitals and homes. She was frequently involved in preaching, what she called her “first love”. Other responsibilities included Bible studies, hospitality, food supply, acting as an advisor to boarding schools, caring for the sick, evangelism, school accreditation, and chapel sermons (in English and in Telugu) at CBM High School, Visakhapatnam. She was also active in interdenominational work at Andhra College, specifically teaching, mentoring, and involved in curriculum development. She especially appreciated ecumenical theological education. On top of that host of responsibilities, due to her husband’s denominational and educational responsibilities taking him on the road quite frequently, she was responsible for much of the child rearing—at least until the kids went off to boarding school.

Much of the focus of her ministry was on education, teaching, writing, and translation. That telos was in keeping with assessments of her in her early years, and her gift for languages can be seen in her adding Hebrew, Telugu, and Sanskrit to her repertoire. Carder had an insatiable desire to learn, and her ministry was also marked by periods of further education. During her furloughs back to Canada, she spent time obtaining additional degrees. It is noteworthy that while obtaining her postgraduate degrees, she also spent time enrolling in additional courses for what she said was the need to take “extra subjects in order to get as broad a background as possible, e.g., Social Anthropology, Geology, History of Philosophy, Hebrew (3 years), Philosophy of Religion, Sanskrit, Hermeneutics, Religious Education, Science and Religion, Comparative Religion, French, Ecumenical Theology”.

On her first furlough, she obtained a Master of Sacred Theology (SMT) at Union Theological Seminary in 1958. She studied under Reinhold Neibuhr, with a thesis entitled “The Ethical Implications of Christ’s Atonement for the Church in a Hindu Society”. She also taught courses at MDC.

Along with the daily responsibilities of ministry, the archives reveal some glimpses of personal struggles for Carder. In one letter, she wrote of how disappointing it was to not be able to bear a child, as well as how shameful it was in an Indian context to not have a baby. That painful experience led to heartfelt theological struggles, what she called “theological machinations”. On a different issue, in the *Link and Visitor*, she shared with readers her disappointment, doubt, and despair over the overwhelming task of the Christian cause in India. However, in that same article, she noted how, in 1961, she visited R. J. McCraken, a former theology professor at McMaster University, who had become the pastor at Riverside Church in New York. He reminded her of *Christus Victor*, the Christian doctrine of the cosmic victory of Christ over sin and its effects. Apparently, that was just what she needed to hear, and Carder went back “with renewed faith, able to preach the resurrection message again, with conviction” (M. M. Carder 1977). She went on to say the following:

The best antidote for doubt and mistrust is a new experience of the power of the risen Christ in our own lives. Probably each of us can recall our own private
Gethsemanes when, after a winter of dark doubt and deep despair, of feeling that the whole bottom had gone out of our existence, we finally capitulated in surrender to God; and from that death emerged a new person, so fresh, forgiven, and invigorated that it could be called a third birth. Then we could understand the exuberant joy of the first disciples, and each new task appeared extraordinarily easy. (M. M. Carder 1977)

Carder wrote that article a decade and a half after her visit with McCraken, an indication of the lasting impact of that meeting.

In 1965–1967, the Carders returned on furlough to southern Ontario for Muriel to work on her doctorate at the University of Toronto. Her attention at that time was in New Testament studies, and, in 1968, she successfully defended her dissertation on the subject of the textual history of Catholic Epistles. Shortly thereafter, in the summer of 1968, Muriel and Gordon flew back to India to serve as faculty at the Ramapatnam Baptist Theological College and at Andhra College. Once there, she taught courses on the New Testament and Greek. In 1973, Andhra College moved to Hyderabad, and the Carders moved with it to continue their teaching. She taught in both English and Telegu. (She also traveled back to North America in 1973 for a three month furlough). Andhra College was an ecumenical institution composed of several denominations and was an example of ecumenism forged by missionary necessities in India. She excitedly entered that ecumenical partnership as one of the founding faculty members, and ecumenism remained a mark of her ministry in India and Canada from those days forward. She also served on a number of commissions for Serampore College, the first Baptist school in India (founded in 1800).

A few comments on her teaching, translating, and publishing are in order. Carder was a gifted teacher. While on furloughs, she taught courses at MDC (1956–57 and 1965–66). After acquiring her ThD, she taught extensively in India. The range of courses was striking, reflecting her interests, experience, and training in languages, New Testament, theology, worship, preaching, ethics, and practical theology. While in India, Carder published a spectrum of works, from the popular to the peer reviewed. She wrote for the church back home in Canada in such denominational periodicals as the Link and Visitor, or Visitor (M. M. Carder 1965a). She also wrote for the church in India. For instance, she composed a children’s story about a young Indian boy entitled Jeevie: An India Boy (M. M. Carder 1963a). She translated the Didache into Telegu, published a booklet on baptism into Telegu, published a pamphlet on the conversion and ministry of a Bible woman named Manikyam (M. M. Carder n.d.), and published a series of lectures in the Bangalore Theological Forum entitled “The Use of the Bible in the Church’s Ministry: The Conservative-Critical (Mediating) Position” (M. M. Carder 1972b). She was also involved with the work of the Bible Society of India in the translating of the New Testament Greek into Telegu, including the making of a Greek grammar text into Telegu. Carder also published a few peer-reviewed works while in India. Both were in the field of biblical studies. In 1970, the results of her dissertation were published in New Testament Studies as “A Caesarean Text in the Catholic Epistles” (M. M. Carder 1970a). The following year, her article entitled “The Biblical Concept of Sin in Translation” was published in the Indian Journal of Theology (M. M. Carder 1971). She was also sought out for her expertise by other scholars carrying out various translation projects. In September 1972, she was invited to attend the International Congress of Learned Societies in Los Angeles and was flown there in a plane chartered by the Society of New Testament Studies. While at the conference, she was interviewed on the Voice of America broadcast.

Carder’s almost three-decade tenure in India was concurrent with the independence of India and the retreat and demise of European empires. Western missionary agencies had to adapt quickly if they were going to remain welcome in former colonies such as India. Carder only rarely mentioned the postcolonial political realities on the ground (not surprising since being too political would jeopardize her welcome in India), and there are only a few clues as to what she thought of politics, the future of missions, and the Indian Church. In her early years, she was concerned about the threat of the spread of
communism. She surmised that “If . . . [India does] not take up the battle [against poverty and injustice] communism will” (Carder and Carder 1954). She supported a united Indian Church, an ecumenical enterprise that also reflected government policy towards western missionaries. However, while she supported an Indian-led church, she believed that the western churches still had a role to play in partnering for the sake of the gospel in the subcontinent. She described her position as a middle ground, with both east and west in an equal and mutually complimentary relationship (M. M. Carder 1965a). She was also sensitive to issues of race and sought to make her home and ministry devoid of racial animus. For example, Carder noted how her home was continually marked by a “constant mixing of races”. That was not by chance, for, in her words: “So we attempt to build, little by little, in ways both tangible and intangible, the Kingdom of God among men and women in this our Indian home”. In a similar vein, in the midst of riots and stark divisions, she declared that Christians must model a different way: “In a divided province and a country riddled with caste, class, and political divisions, it is more important than ever for Christians to show their unity in Christ” (M. M. Carder 1974).

The “Letter from the Field” for the year 1974 was filled with reminiscing and pathos, for Carder was recognizing that she and her husband were getting old. She reflected on how, at one time decades earlier, she and the other new recruits had looked up to the veteran senior missionaries. But now, she declared, “suddenly, the realization dawned with post-monsoon clarity: we are the seniors!” While she stated in that letter that they were not considering retiring, by the end of 1976, they had changed their minds and had retired from the mission field and returned to Canada. The possible various motives for the change of mind are not clear in the historical records.

4. Canada

After listing in December 1976 what everyone else in the family was doing as they adjusted to Canada, Carder wrote: “Mum slogs away at Bible translation at home but wants a challenging job outside”. It did not take long for her to find it. Despite some difficulties finding a CBOQ church for Gordon to pastor, and even flirting with a decision to return to India, Carder threw herself into work that, in various ways, mirrored her work in India, such as denominational committee work. For instance, she (and Claire Holmes) served on the CBOQ Task Force on Women in Christian Ministry, a committee founded in 1979 by the denomination to respond to a lack of positive movement towards increasing the role of women in the CBOQ. A few years later, the denomination created a committee entitled “Working Group on Equality in Ministry: Our Response and Responsibility”. Carder did not serve on the committee, but she was interviewed for her input as one of four key women who had made a “significant contribution” to the denomination.

As a result of acting on that call, Carder’s post-India decades were quickly marked by training for chaplaincy as well as serving in a variety of government-run institutions. In 1979, she served as chaplain at D’Arcy Place Development Centre, Cobourg and then was appointed to be a chaplain at East Oxford Regional Centre, Woodstock caring for 700 mentally challenged adults (Moves 1980). Her methods were noted to be thoughtful, innovative, as well as geared towards bringing reforms to those within the care of the institution. For example, she sought to get patients active, included a range of senses in
liturgy, used music to free emotions, urged carefulness in the use of guilt, and established pastoral counseling needed to help patients deal with loss and fear of death.\textsuperscript{53} A further example of her work with the marginalized was how, in recognition of the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981), she was pictured on the front cover of the \textit{Link and Visitor} leading a worship service.\textsuperscript{54}

Reflecting her new calling for the care of those in such institutions, Carder’s academic attention shifted from the New Testament and its translation to that of spiritual care. By the mid-1980s, she had published two articles in the \textit{Journal of Pastoral Care} that identified the spiritual needs of the mentally challenged.\textsuperscript{55} The first article focused on general spiritual needs (M. M. Carder 1984), the second on understanding the experiences surrounding death (M. M. Carder 1987).

In the process of theological leadership development, something that she had invested significant energy in, Carder became qualified to be a Supervisor of Clinical Pastoral Education (assistant in 1981 and full supervisor in 1983).\textsuperscript{56} In the following years, she supervised students from a host of southern Ontario theological schools, such as Conrad Grebel, Huron, McMaster, Trinity, Waterloo Lutheran, and Wycliffe. She also contributed to denominational life by writing\textsuperscript{57} and speaking\textsuperscript{58} on issues related to church life. It is surprising she did not seem to teach as a faculty member at MDC or any theological school for that matter.

By the late-1980s and into the 1990s, Carder was becoming recognized for her many decades of service, and accolades started to come. In 1987, both the First Baptist Church, Woodstock and the Oxford Regional Centre had a special service recognizing Carder on the fortieth anniversary of her ordination.\textsuperscript{59} She was honored in 1988 as Distinguished Graduate by the McMaster Divinity Graduates Association.\textsuperscript{60} Shortly thereafter, in 1991, McMaster University recognized her as a “distinguished scholar, missionary statesperson, chaplain, and outstanding church leader” and granted her a Doctor of Divinity, honoris causa.\textsuperscript{61} In 2007, Carder was awarded the Katherine Hokin Award for Global Mission and Ministry, an honor granted by the Canadian Churches Forum for Global Ministries. The service and dinner were held at Yorkminster Park Baptist Church, a CBOQ flagship church in Toronto.\textsuperscript{62} A few years later, she received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for service to the community. Those years of accolades were also marked by grief, for her husband Gordon died on 14 March 1997.

Despite an active and feisty life, one that included gardening, hiking, and (daily) jogging into her 80s—not to mention regularly playing badminton into her early 90s—age inevitably took its toll. Carder managed to carry out chaplaincy duties until she retired from Woodstock Hospital in 2018 at the age of 96.\textsuperscript{63} She also started suffering from dementia in her 90s.\textsuperscript{64} She died on 14 June 2023, in Woodstock, Ontario.

5. Reflections and Legacy

A few final thoughts related to reflections and legacy are in order. In several ways, Carder fits easily into popular stereotypes of a female missionary: married to a prominent ordained missionary-husband, primary caregiver at home, and involved in the care of women and children. Yet, in many other ways, she was no different from the males on the mission field. Her plethora of activities in Indian churches, hospitals, and educational institutions as preacher, teacher, scholar, translator, professor, and mentor lend credence to Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin’s claim that male and female clergy, “while possibly different in many ways, are not drastically different in their leadership styles and approach to the ministry”.\textsuperscript{65} In fact, she is a rare case of a missionary wife’s reputation and recognition eclipsing her well-educated and accomplished missionary husband.

Being a supporter of women’s ordination meant for some that Carder was a feminist or “women’s libber”—something that Claire Holmes also faced in 1979 when she was the second ordained woman in the CBOQ.\textsuperscript{66} Yet, Carder is not easily typecast. It is noteworthy that while Carder was an advocate for women’s ordination, she seemed to avoid taking on the identity of a feminist, probably because her own views did not mesh well
with a more radical feminist agenda. It may also have been part of strategy to avoid being associated with a movement that would have led to a loss of support among some in conservative Baptist circles. Whatever the case, when asked if her mother would have seen herself as a feminist, Karen Carder responded “no, oh gosh no”.67 Karen went on to say that her mother had no time for people who called themselves that; instead, Carder thought people should simply do what they do and not broadcast it.

As Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin note, support for the ordination of women opens one up to the suspicion of being “liberal”.68 But was she? Her writings and actions as pastor, mentor, and chaplain reflect an evangelical Baptist piety marked by enthusiasm for both spreading the gospel and alleviating human suffering.69 She also used typical evangelical language of saving souls, importance of the Bible for the Christian life, and divine calling. She also had a conservative theological statement in her application for being a missionary. Her research on the authorship of the biblical text was fairly conservative, as was her commitment to the work of Bible translation. Yet, she was not a fundamentalist, for her robust life of the mind was on display in her scholarship, in her partnerships with other denominations not necessarily evangelical, as well as being aware of modern critical methods of biblical scholarship. Other factors also make her hard to pigeonhole. She was committed to ecumenical partnerships with other churches in India and Canada, whether it be in missions, education, or chaplaincy. Her supervision was with students across the spectrum of theological schools, from liberal to evangelical. She remained a mother devoted to her children but also pursued ordination and the breaking of traditional gender boundaries. She also sought solace from the pastor of one of the iconic liberal Baptist churches of the day (Riverside Church). Perhaps a helpful clue to her position can be found in the title of an article she published in the Bangalore Theological Forum: “The Use of the Bible in the Church’s Ministry: The Conservative-Critical (Mediating) Position” (M. M. Carder 1972b). In sum, the middle position was not a waffling indecisive one, but rather one where a person who “has thoroughly examined the views of both sides of that fence and has decided that he wishes to jump wholeheartedly neither into this nor that field of thought because he sees thorns as well as flowers in each field”!71 It was, in her words, “a freedom from fundamentalism but not from fundamentals”.72

A few comments on academic legacy are in order. In the Indian context, her research on biblical and theological issues related to Bible translation, as well as decades of translating the Bible into Telegu, continues to bear fruit for the Christian church in India. In fact, her language expertise influenced theological students up until very recently, as they used her manuscript for teaching Greek to students at Andhra College (now called Andhra Christian Theological College).73 Not finding an academic post when she returned to Canada, Muriel quickly pivoted to the care of the mentally challenged. In fact, she practiced and published in this area longer than the time she spent in India. It was a second call that she lived out right until a few years before her death. Her two articles in Journal of Pastoral Care, along with her practical innovations over decades of chaplaincy, provide rich material for those today seeking to shape Christian ministry among those facing such challenges. In fact, a study of her innovations and publications in this area of mental health and challenge would make a good project of resource for today’s churches trying to deal with similar issues.74

One of the most pressing questions for some is her legacy in advancing the role of women in the church, both in India and Canada. Carder’s presence as one of the earliest faculty members at Andhra College, a practice of female professors there that continues to this day, is an indication of her legacy in the Indian Church. Accolades from Carder’s former Indian students attest to her vital legacy in India.75 However, as Taneti argues, there needs to be care that highlighting the role of western women in the advancement of Indian women does not lead to an eclipse of the agency of Indian female leaders to chart their own better course (Taneti 2013). In other words, while Carder’s example and instruction played a role opening up new vistas for women in the Indian church, her role was simply a part of a larger complex interplay between eastern and western churchwomen’s efforts to advance the cause of women.
There is an element of her missionary work that mirrored traditional “women’s work,” but in India, that was actually an advantage for a female missionary. Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of Christian missions was the participation of “indispensable” Biblewomen who labored—often in anonymity—to spread the gospel in village after village, going where western missionaries (especially males) could not go or being heard where they could not be heard. And Carder considered her participation in and support of their work to be a vital part of her calling. Near the end of her years in India, she noted how much had changed for herself and for women in India.

In my own profession I have seen a similar, though not commensurate, advance. From my student days 30 years ago when I was the only girl in B.D. and the men laughed good-natured but skeptical laughs at the thought of little Miss Spurgeon being a pastor, to those days when in so many countries of the world and in so many denominations women are being admitted into the ordained ministry. It would require a book to list them all. . . . Christian women in India are waking up to the possibilities of leadership in the Church and more so in North India than South India. The women in the C.N.I. are determined to open the door to ordination for women and men. “Not many may go through it,” one medical doctor, wife of a bishop, said to me, “but we are more insistent because the door is closed.” Two of them have written good, sensible articles in the C.N.I. Churchman, and so has the General Secretary of C.N.I. who is a forward-looking man. (I have also contributed to it twice).

Of course, missionary impact on India for good or bad is difficult to assess, for, as Mary Farrell Bednarowski notes, western missionaries were “both a conservative force and a modernizing one. . . . it both affirmed women’s traditional, subservient domestic role and inexorably undermined it.” Carder was astute enough to know about the complexity of social change and her own impact on that process. That said, what she concluded from her own experience was that the roles of Indian women had begun to change over the course of her thirty-year tenure, and that, she concluded, was something to celebrate.

Finally, what did Carder think about the climate for women in the CBOQ? Elizabeth Gillan Muir and Marilyn Färdig Whiteley speak of “persistent male opposition” facing many (most) women entering into Christian ministry (Muir and Whiteley 1995, p. 4). What is interesting is that Carder’s experience seemed to lack that opposition. In a letter to a librarian at Union Theological Seminary, 20 January 2016, Carder stated “I can count only 3 or 4 instances in 59 years when I was not allowed to speak or preach, that the hard parts [of ministry] were nothing to do with that sort of thing.” She knew of the kerfuffle made among some during her ordination, and had heard the laugher of some men, but it seems that she did not feel that the CBOQ or missionary realities in India were repressive or restrictive. She may have felt differently if she had stayed in Canada from the start of her first calling, but what did happen for her was that the mission field opened extensive opportunities for a brilliant young woman.

Yet, being successful and brilliant does not always make things (immediately) better. As Sara Maitland notes, women being ordained into a male system may not help; in fact, it may make things harder, for, in being ordained, it may seem that all is now well and patriarchy and injustice have disappeared: “Exceptional women have not always worked to the advantage of the rest of us. Just as people will tell you now that there is no more need for a women’s liberation movement because Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, so Christians will say that there cannot be anything wrong with the position of women because of St Teresa of Avila or Julian of Norwich.” In fact, by entering into the churches’ system of governance, there is the risk of being assimilated into a system that works counter to the aims of those seeking to further women’s participation into the life of the church. The fact that the next woman ordained in the CBOQ after Carder was Claire Holmes in 1979, thirty two years after Carder, gives some credence to the comments of Maitland. However, change takes time, and perhaps a long view provides a different assessment of Carder’s impact. For instance, a recent poll of CBOQ women pastors taken for this research
indicates that Carder’s ordination and subsequent ministry has been an inspiration for many CBOQ women. For instance, out of twenty-eight female CBOQ pastors polled, twenty-three knew of Muriel Carder. Of those twenty-three, 83% ranked medium or high when asked about her influence on their ministry. As one woman stated after seeing Carder preach at her church in the 1970s: “She came to preach, and she actually preached. I remember thinking, ‘gee, a woman can do this’. I remember that as being a little aha moment” (Anonymous 2022). That woman went on to ordination and pastoral ministry in the CBOQ.

There is much more to be explored regarding Carder, and my hope is that this brief article provides some impetus for more detailed and comprehensive research on such an iconic figure in the CBOQ. That said, this article does more than merely provide a summary of her life and legacy. It also explores some common assumptions about Canadian women in ministry, identifying when she reinforces some and undermines others. In other words, the example of Carder complexifies what can be assumed about the experience of women in the church and warns against universal generalizations surrounding their experience.

6. Postscript

The record of women in India and the CBOQ is complex and follows no simple or single triumphant telos. As Joan Sangster reminds us, we need to avoid seeing the shifts in history as easy to identify and as monochrome narratives. For instance, recent events among Baptists in India and Canada raise questions and concerns about the telos of history and Carder’s legacy.

Muriel Carder’s daughter Karen believed that her mother’s legacy was greater in India than in Canada, and one important aspect of that legacy was opening up opportunities for women. Yet, the work of Carder (and countless others) in India remains challenging. In 2016, the All India Baptist Fellowship organized a Women’s Forum to discuss the possibilities and problems related to the treatment and roles of women in the church in India. Clearly, there were ongoing issues among Indian Baptists that needed to be addressed in order to provide further opportunity and more safety for women in the church.

Another example of that uncertainty is a recent decision in the CBOQ to reaffirm its commitment to women’s ordination in the face of perceived growing disagreement with the denomination’s position in support of women’s ordination. Some felt that in the past decade or more, there had been a “backlash” against such changes, something that Barbara Zikmund et al. note can happen if gains are not supported. The CBOQ decision was, to use Mark Chaves’ expression, a “symbolic display that is part of a broader process by which denominations construct their public identities”. At the 2023 CBOQ Assembly, the motion (with a reference to Carder mentioned in it) to reaffirm its position of support for women’s ordination and opportunity in all areas of the church’s life passed by well over 90%. Fears of an unraveling of past gains seem, at the moment, to be unwarranted, and Carder’s legacy on that front remained intact.

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Notes

1 This is usually referred to as the creation of an “other,” an expression made famous by Edward Said. See (Said 1978).

2 The CBA holds a small box of Muriel’s material, as well as a number of larger boxes of material comprised of documents related to both her and her husband (Gordon). References in these footnotes to this box is Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

3 A summary of that interview is in the authors’ possession.
Muriel mentioned in a letter that she had started an autobiography as well as had a file drawer of personal journals. See Letter to the Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, 20 January 2016, in “Letter with Biographical Information Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA (Muriel Carder Box n.d.). Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, stated that Carder’s records were never accepted by Union—see personal email to author dated 11 March 2024. Of note is that thirty-five boxes of her correspondence and papers were shredded by her family when she moved out of her house and into a seniors’ home. See interview with Karen by the author.

Carey’s father was the son of Rev. Robert Spurgeon (a cousin of C. H. Spurgeon). Her mother was Elizabeth Francis (Keeley).

Later known as Highland Baptist.

However, a few Canadian women had been ordained before her. In 1901, Ella Hadassah Kinney Saunders of the Reformed Baptists was ordained in Saint John, NB, to go overseas to South Africa. Shortly thereafter, in 1909, Jennie Johnson, a Black Baptist woman from Ontario was ordained in Michigan, US, but served as a pastor in Southern Ontario. In 1954, Maritime Baptists ordained Josephine Moore and the BUWC ordained Mae Benedict in 1959. See (Heath et al. 2022, pp. 72–73). For a history of Canadian Baptist Jennie Johnson, see (Reid-Maroney 2013).

Letter dated 1 September 1944 in “Missionary Appointment Correspondence 1944–1947 Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA; “Presentation of Muriel Carder,” in “Biography Documents Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

Application to Candidates for Missionary Appointment, in “Missionary Appointment Correspondence 1944–1947 Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

An article in the Globe and Mail claims that her missionary interests were also sparked by a glass case filled with Indian items brought back from India by her grandfather. See (Pitcher 1962).

Emphasis in the original. See Application to Candidates for Missionary Appointment, in “Missionary Appointment Correspondence 1944–1947 Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.


(CBOQ 1946–1947). See also unpublished (at the moment) paper entitled “It takes a while for people’s hearts to catch up with their heads: Women’s Ordination in the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, 1947–1979” by Leanne Friesen and Taylor Murray on the ordination of women in the CBOQ (Murray and Friesen n.d.). Thanks to both Leanne and Taylor for allowing me to view their paper.

(Miss Muriel Spurgeon 1947). That attack no doubt influenced Muriel’s future husband, W. Gordon Carder, when he wrote what Doug Adams calls his “particularly hostile treatment of Shields” assessment decades later. See (Adams 2015).

Letter dated 14 July 1947 in “Missionary Appointment Correspondence 1944–1947 Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

“Missionary Appointment Correspondence 1944–1947 Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

(Maxwell 2020, p. 54).

The wedding was in India on 3 March 1951. For wedding announcement and ceremony, see (The C.B.M. Wedding at Kakinada 1951).

Biographical summary for MDC Distinguished Graduate, 1988, in “Muriel Carder Biography Documents Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

It seems as if she wrote these on behalf of herself and her husband.

See “Gordon and Muriel Carder Letters from Field (India) Envelope” in MC Box, CBA; Farewell and Welcome Address, India, in “Muriel Carder Biography Documents Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

(Barnes 2013, p. 164).

(Spurgeon 1951, p. 163).

See her CV in “Muriel Carder Biography Documents Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

Letter to the Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, 20 January 2016, in “Letter with Biographical Information Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

Her dissertation was entitled “An Inquiry into the Textual Transmission of the Catholic Epistles”. For correspondence to supporters at the beginning and end of her furlough, see “Muriel Carder, letter to Mr. Dorai Raj Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

The Church of South India was a Protestant union of churches necessitated by the independence of India in 1947. For some supportive comments by Carder on the ecumenical impulse among the churches in India, see Carder comments from an interview in an unpublished paper by Mark Scievour (n.d.) entitled “The Church of South India: From Schemes to Success” (2015).

For commentary on ecumenism, see letter dated Summer 1974 in “Gordon and Muriel Carder Letters from Field (India) Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA; letter dated 8 May 1975 in “Gordon and Muriel Carder Letters from Field (India) Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA; Elizabeth Smith, “Christian Religion in India Could Be Model for the World,” Spectator, 1 June 1973, 2 a copy in “Muriel Carder Clippings Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.
See her CV in “Muriel Carder Biography Documents Envelope” in MC Box, CBA. One biographical summary states that her work in teaching and translation was “perhaps her most significant contribution”. See Link and Visitor, July 1980, 33. That month saw a union of all Canadian Baptist papers under the title Baptist Canada.


Published by Telegu Theological Literature Board.

For instance, see letter dated 11 November 1969 from the Bible Society of India asking Carder for assistance in the translation of certain books of the Bible into Telegu. See “Muriel Carder 2000-0467 Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA. See also extensive correspondence in “Muriel Carder Bible Society Correspondence File Folder” and “Muriel Carder Bible Translation Files File Folder” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

For instance, see letter dated 10 November 1975 in “Muriel Carder Correspondence Containing Theological Article Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA; “Bible Society Files Envelope” and “Bible Translation Envelope” in MC Box, CBA.

When asked about her mother’s political views on the post-colonial situation in India, Karen said that her mother did not speak much of politics. Rather what best described her position was a posture of how “may I help to make your life better and to help you see my faith?” See Interview with Karen by the author.

Letter dated 8–10 April 1964 in “Gordon and Muriel Carder Letters from Field (India) Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA. See above note 9.

Letter dated Summer 1974 in “Gordon and Muriel Carder Letters from Field (India) Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA. Emphasis in original.

One former faculty member from McMaster Divinity College suggested to the author that one important contributing factor to the decision was the financial crisis of the 1970s and the subsequent paring down of the number of CBOMB missionaries.

Letter dated 12 December 1976 in “Gordon and Muriel Carder Letters from Field (India) Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA. Gordon eventually ended up pastoring Honeywood-Hornings Mills United Church, Dufferin-Peel Presbytery. See (Moves 1980).

Interview with Karen Carder 2024).

She became a member of James Street Baptist Church, Hamilton, ON.

“Report to the Department of the Ministry on Behalf of the Task Force on Women in Ministry,” in file titled “Department of Ministry-Executive, 1979–1980”, in box titled “Department of Ministry—Various Committee & Executive Minutes” at CBA (Task Force on Women in Ministry 1979–1980). A few years later the denomination created a Working Group on Equality in Ministry: Our Response and Responsibility. Carder did not serve on the committee, but she was interviewed for her input as one of four key women who had made a “significant contribution” to the denomination. See (CBOQ 1993).

See (CBOQ 1993).

“What is a MA?” in “Muriel Carder Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA. See above note 50.

Perhaps further access to her personal dairies will cast light on the subject. Her daughter Karen thought it could possibly be a reference to a teaching position at MDC or a pastoral position at a local Baptist church, but she was not sure what her mother was referring to in that statement.


(Rothwell 1983). For examples of chapel services, see bulletins in “Muriel Carder Biography Documents Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

She also had an article in that issue. See (M. M. Carder 1981).

She also reviewed Stanley Hauerwas’ edited volume entitled Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church (1986). See (M. M. Carder 1986).

See above note 25.

(M. M. Carder 1985). See clipping in “Muriel Carder Clippings Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

For instance, she spoke at Knox Presbyterian Church Women’s Missionary Society Thanksgiving Meeting. See (Former Missionary Will Speak 1980).

See service bulletins in “Muriel Carder Biography Documents Envelope” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

See letter in “Muriel Carder Biography Documents” in Muriel Carder Box, CBA.

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