Chapter 3—The History of Social Work

Social Gospel, Social Work, and Social Action

During this period of social reform, the social gospel movement had a particular influence on Canadian social work. Movements for a more socially oriented church, which would apply Christian ethics to social problems, began to appear within the major Protestant churches in the latter part of the 19th century. Within each of the Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Congregationalist churches, there were movements for a more socially oriented message, or social gospel, concerning justice and social action. The social gospel wings of the churches eventually started many of the settlement houses in Canada. The movement also had strong roots in the prairies.

In 1907, these main Protestant churches established the Moral and Social Reform League. This was the first organization in the country to advocate for social reform. The League was the forerunner of the Social Service Council of Canada, founded in 1914, with the Rev. J.G. Shearer serving as its first director. The Council remained the main social service advocacy organization in Canada for the next 20 years. The name change indicated the shift from a religious and moral perspective to a more scientific one. Not carried out casually, this move was indicative of larger changes in Canadian society, promoting a reform movement that sought to distance itself from a moral base. Several leading members of Canada’s trade union movement were active in the Council. After 1925, the Social Service Council declined in significance and was replaced by the Canadian Association of Social Workers in 1927.

J.S. Woodsworth (1874–1942) applied social gospel ideas to his work in social services and later to his political life. Woodsworth was a Methodist minister, born in Ontario and raised in Manitoba, who became interested in social welfare work while studying at Oxford University. Woodsworth returned to Canada, taking a position as minister in Winnipeg, and began working with the city’s poor immigrants. He helped develop the work of social workers there, which then spread to other parts of Canada. For example, as part of the settlement house movement he created the All People’s Mission, which provided a variety of direct social services. He campaigned for compulsory education, juvenile courts, and the construction of playgrounds. Woodsworth also served as secretary of the Social Welfare League. Social gospel reformers such as Woodsworth were greatly influenced by the labour movement, particularly by ideas concerning worker control of enterprises and workers’ direct participation in decision-making.

In the churches, this spirit manifested itself as the social gospel, implying the achievement of justice in this world rather than in the next. For these reformers, service to other human beings was considered a form of service to God. Many Canadian historians, such as Ramsey Cook (1985), view social work as the secular replacement of the social gospel movement.

Psychology and Social Work

The theories of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychology, played an increasingly important role in social work in the 1920s, in tandem with Richmond’s text, Social Diagnosis. While the latter provided guidance on procedure, Freud provided insight into the inner workings of the individual. Social work shifted from a concern with the societal context to a concern with a person’s psychological make-up as the source of problems. Goldstein’s comments on American trends apply since the American influence was still very strong in Canada: “Freudian theory overshadowed all other approaches to social problems and orientations about behaviour. By the mid-1920s casework teaching staffs at universities taught psychoanalytic principles as a basis for casework practice.” (Goldstein 1973, 31).

Ideas based on Freudian thought (see page 67) led to a change in social work, in a sense, supporting a move from a more active to a more passive role for the worker. This was designed to permit social work clients to express themselves. Casework remained the dominant form of social work practice, but social workers began to specialize in such areas as family welfare, hospitals, and psychiatry.

In the 1930s, what became known as functional social work, in which the casework relationship itself would aid the client, began to emerge. Also during this time, group work and community work emerged as different forms of social work (Goldstein 1973, 31–38).