

Rev. Dr. J. R. Joyce



Joseph Gilbert Joyce was born in Carbonear, Newfoundland on November 23, 1889, the first child of an average middle class family. His father, Edward B. Joyce was a fisherman while his mother, Emira Jane Joyce ran a general store. Joseph had a younger brother, Douglas Alick Joyce and three sisters Diademia Jeffers, Julia May and Sophie Jones Joyce. Mrs. Joyce was determined that Joseph and his brothers do well and make something of themselves.

Joseph Joyce received his early education at Carbonear Methodist Primary School, following which he attended Bishop Field Secondary School in St. Johns, Newfoundland. Joyce was received as a candidate for the Methodist Ministry in the Newfoundland Conference in 1911 and served as probationer in Hants Harbour in 1912 and Petites, Newfoundland in 1913. At age 24 he entered Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada where he studied from 1913 until 1917, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts. He was then ordained by the Methodist Conference at Harbour Grace, Newfoundland on September 12, 1917.

Following ordination, instead of pursuing the traditional path of ministry, Joyce obtained permission to continue studies in Boston University that he attended from 1917 to 1920, graduating with a Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Sacred Theology. While studying at Boston University, Rev. Joyce also served a parish in Manchester, New Hampshire, U.S.A.

While at Mount Allison, he met Susan Hannah Mellett Carlton who was attending Mount Allison Ladies College, and they were married on September 17, 1921 in her hometown of Souris, PEI where her family had moved from Boston to start a business. Together they had two children, Douglas Alick and Carlton Spencer Joyce. Susan Carlton's main focus of study was music, which would stand her in good stead as a Minister's wife in later years. After their wedding, Rev. Joyce accepted the position of Minister of the Britannia - Foster's Point Pastoral Charge in Newfoundland and moved there with his new wife in 1921. Rev. Joyce accepted the position of Minister of Wesley Methodist Church, St. John's Newfoundland in 1922 where he stayed until 1930.

Joyce had a well-deserved reputation as an energetic organizer who got things done. Soon after arriving at Wesley he called a meeting of the Trustee Board at the parsonage to illustrate the need for renovations and repairs to the rundown structure. The matter was addressed shortly thereafter. He then proceeded to organize a campaign to liquidate the debt of the Church, assisted by a \$100.00 pledge from Rev. Joyce himself to kick off the campaign. Having retired the church debt, Rev. Joyce focused his energies on his dream of a radio station and by 1923 these plans were well underway.

Rev. Joyce had a dream of reaching, by means of radio, the isolated people along the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador as well as his own parishioners at Wesley Methodist Church who were unable to attend worship services. Initially, this remarkable Pastor looked for ways to communicate the gospel message to members of the Wesley Methodist Church congregation, many of whom were unable to attend regular worship services due to age and infirmity etc. He originally utilized 'parallel telephone lines' connected directly from the pulpit to 'broadcast' to a select number of homes. Listeners dialed in and listened to the service on their telephones. Joyce saw the new medium of radio as a better method to spread the word of God, having been fascinated with radio and its potential since his youth.

Indeed, only 23 years after Marconi received the first wireless signal at historic Signal Hill, located adjacent to the mouth of St. John's Harbour, Rev. Joyce's vision and view of the potential for radio went far beyond that of the Church Boards of the day who felt

that Wesley Church should not be '*dabbling in this new-fangled contraption*'. Joyce persevered however, as he foresaw radio as a spiritual instrument to augment his pastoral work, and his vision gained momentum. Objections from the church community, many of whom viewed radio as the 'devil's works', were overcome, and a space for a studio was found. Joyce proceeded to solicit from businesses and the public and by June 1924, \$1000 has been raised.

On July 20, 1924 the very first broadcast of 8WMC (which stood for Wesley Methodist Church) was heard. The call letters 'VO' were assigned to the Country of Newfoundland (prior to confederation with Canada which took place in 1949) in 1927 as part of an international agreement reached in Washington, D.C. As a result, in 1932, 8WMC became VOWR (**Voice Of Wesley Radio**, not by design, but a fortunate coincidence never the less!). Rev. Joyce wrote the *following account of that first broadcast* :

'The project involved more than was contemplated. The Church officials merely consented for the poles to be erected at the rear of the edifice. The financial obligations were assumed by the pastor who helped to develop an interest in broadcasting on the part of the public and in that way to gain financial support through voluntary contributions. No more financial expenditure was permitted than could possibly be avoided, consequently the high poles necessary to hold an aerial were supplied by an Anglican and a Catholic, and placed in position by a Methodist and his crew of men. Even the deep holes in the ground for the poles were dug by free labour. The wire stays to hold the poles in place were supplied without charge. Very little expense was entailed in the necessary electric wiring because of capable electricians volunteering their service. Carpenters, masons, shipwrights and a host of other men took part in making possible a broadcasting outlet in Newfoundland.

As it is today, the station's motto in 1924 was 'We Serve'. From the beginning, Rev. Joyce foresaw the use of radio as a religious/cultural medium with an ecumenical focus. Ecumenism remains a key feature of VOWR to this day. An early example of the spirit of ecumenism associated with VOWR is evident in Rev. Joyce's own writings about the

start-up costs in the early days of 8WMC as the aerial and other infrastructure were put into place.

There were many problems affecting the propriety of a church run radio station in these early years. In February 1926, for example, Rev. Joyce, while listening to the station at home heard a broadcast about a new type of gramophone that was being demonstrated by the playing of 'Fox Trot records'. Horrified, he hastened immediately to the Church Studio to berate the unfortunate operator for playing, what he considered at the time, to be the epitome of *profane* if not *immoral* musical fare! A similar reaction brought Rev. Joyce to the studio on the run when an operator played the *Irish Washerwoman* which Joyce felt was inappropriate for his radio station. In 1928 he turned down an offer of \$5,000 annually, a considerable sum in those days, from the Bulova Watch Company to add to its 'Sign on' and 'Sign Off' the slogan '*that the time is now...courtesy of the Bulova Watch Company*'.

To protect the valuable radio equipment Joyce rigged an alarm in his nearby residence which would cause a bell to ring if anybody entered the transmission room. Rev. Joyce enjoyed a broad range of interests including woodworking, astronomy, genealogy, etymology, ceramic as well as radio technology and pastoral duties. He also maintained a keen interest in the Boy Scouts and attended a Scout Jamboree in England in 1929. Mrs. Joyce wrote of this period: '*In the early days of 8WMC, the founder helped boys in the church to make crystal sets, which consisted of the crystal, coil and the whisker for tuning on that coil of fine copper wire carefully wound on a cylinder.*'

The initial transmitter did not prove powerful enough to reach the more distant and remote areas of Newfoundland and Labrador. Rev. Joyce wrote: '*The little transmitter was unable to give the desired range and hundreds of people up north and in the interior of the country became terribly disappointed. There was no choice but to think of transmitting equipment which could cover the whole country.*' In preparation for purchasing a newer and more powerful transmitter, the ever-dedicated Rev. Joyce spent two summer vacations at the Marconi Company factory in Montreal, Quebec, Canada to familiarize himself with the newer models. Rev. Joyce received a letter from

Guglielmo Marconi himself, noting in response to Joyce's letter requesting financial support for the station, that while he (Marconi) was unable to contribute a cash donation as such, he would indeed write the Managing Director of the Canadian Marconi Company asking him to meet with Joyce and '*assist in every way possible regarding the purchase of new equipment*'.

Ever confident, and consistent with his ecumenical philosophy, Joyce felt comfortable in having other denominations share in his radio station project. He was also extremely confident when appealing for funds, regardless of the social standing, political leaning or denomination of the potential donor. He was equally comfortable in the presence of the Governor, other politicians and the powerful merchants of the day, all of whom had great respect for Joyce's skills and organizational abilities. Joyce arranged for replacement of the 100 watt transmitter with a 500 watt transmitter, purchased from public donations received from 'all quarters', and installed in 1927. The inaugural broadcast included an address by Newfoundland's Governor Sir William Allardyce from his residence at Government House. The station's signal that day was heard as far away as Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A. Radio station 8WMC was the major radio station in Newfoundland at that time.

When 8WMC started in 1924, and for several years thereafter, Rev. Joyce had assumed full control of the radio station. In 1930 he requested the official Board of Wesley Church to assume control of the station and appoint a Board of Directors to oversee the operations of the station. This was done and the VOWR Radio Board remains in place today. In 1930 Joyce sought a new posting and left Wesley United Church. His dream of a radio station was well established by then and remains a dynamic organization that continues to play a vital role in the community today. Rev. Joyce served a congregation in Merrickville United Church, Ontario from 1930 until 1933 and then the congregation of Verdun United Church, Montreal from 1933 until his retirement in 1957. After retirement, Joyce served in Greenville, North Carolina Presbyterian Church from 1957 until 1958 followed by his final posting in Washington, North Carolina where served from 1958 until his death in 1959.

Rev. Joyce, along with his many other achievements, graduated from Union Theological College, Montreal as a Doctor of Theology in 1931. His doctoral research focused on '*Environment and Social Factors in Newfoundland*'. Interestingly, while much of this work was developed in the late 1920's, Dr. Joyce showed considerable foresight, again demonstrating his ecumenical leanings, as he wrote at that time '*Another impediment to culture is the denominational system of education.*' He went on to champion the cause of amalgamation of resources and a reduction in the duplication of effort which would allow Newfoundland to '*liberate herself from the stifling influence of the past and create a more genuine appreciation for education.*' It would take another 70 years before this amalgamation would actually occur!

Dr. Joyce maintained contact with VOWR over the years. When the station's transmitting power was increased to 1000 watts in 1948, he returned to St. John's from his posting in Quebec to 'throw the switch' for the new transmitter. In July 1954, the station celebrated its 30th anniversary, with Rev. Dr. Joyce again returning to preside over a memorial service. When new studios were constructed in 1959, they were dedicated to Rev. Joyce who died earlier that year. A bronze bust of Joyce is currently on display in the VOWR studio, having been presented to VOWR by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and dedicated by his widow in 1976.

Rev. Dr. J. G. Joyce and his wife are buried in Souris United Cemetery in Prince Edward Island.

Much of this account of the life of Rev. Dr. J. G. Joyce is taken from the book: VOWR The Unfolding Dream by Rev. Dr. H. K. Swain, 1999 (Creative Publishers, St. John's NF)