

'Bible belt' founder

Church to honor

late Alta. premier

the religions

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LATE PREMIER WILLIAM ABERHART
... founded Prophetic Bible Institute

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Alberta has been recognized for many years as "the Bible belt" and the man chiefly responsible for making it so, the late William Aberhart, will be honored April 20 when Bethel Baptist Church marks its 40th anniversary,

Bethel's pastor, Rev. Bill Laing, who came as a student to the historical Prophetic Bible Institute founded by Aberhart, said this week Aberhart left an indelible stamp on Western Canada, and for this reason the downtown Calgary church will pay tribute to his memory.

"Bible exposition was his hallmark as a public spirit, and he was a spiritual leader who introduced many of Bethel's present members to the teachings of Christ," Laing said.

Two men whose lives have been profoundly influenced by Aberhart will be the guest speakers at special services April 20. Hon. E. C. Manning, former Alberta premier and pupil of the institute founder, will address the morning service and Rev. Cyril Hutchinson, associated for many years with Bethel Church and with the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute, will speak at the evening service.

Mrs. E. C. Manning (the former Muriel Preston) also closely associated with the institute in its early days, as was her mother, will attend the anniversary service.

Bethel Church at 830 7 Ave. S.W., as a structure, is less than 20 years old. But its congregational history, interwoven with the old Prophetic Bible Institute, is double that age. It is one of 17 Alberta churches whose roots go back to the old institute.

Laing traced the history back to its beginning in the 1920's when the late William Aberhart began lay classes in Bible study. Then followed a CFCN radio contract, with broadcasts coming from the old Grand and Palace theatres. Westbourne Baptist Church became Aberhart's home church.

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When the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute was finally dedicated in 1927, Westbourne Baptist Church moved into the building on 8 Ave S.W., leaving the old Westbourne church at 13 Ave and 4 St. S. E., standing vacant.

Laing said a couple of years later, part of the congregation decided to start a Sunday school in the old Westbourne Church in east Calgary. Some of the congregation returned there, leaving a nucleus at the Bible Institute to form the Bible Institute Baptist Church. It is from this date that Bethel reckons its age.

The BIPC remained in the same building as the Prophectic Institute until 1950, then decided to find a home of their own.

"We were instructed to go between 17 Ave. S.W. and 16 Ave. N.W., but had authorization to spend only \$10,000," Laing recalled.

They found property on 8 Ave. S.W. which seemed ideal, but there was a hitch. Asking price for the 125-foot lot owned by "an old street car man named Bill Smith" was \$20,000.

"We had only \$8,500 in the building treasury, but on Nov. 30, 1951, we resolved to buy the property if within the month we could raise the remaining \$11,500 to meet the asking price.

"Christmas that year, was a time to remember as the day the last dollar was raised.

The Bethel congregation spent its first year holding services in the finished basement. Then the late J. O. Cummins, carpenter and deacon of the church, and a second carpenter, Frank Kerr, were employed to complete the sanctuary.

The move upstairs followed in 1953, and now an average

congregation of 450 (membership of approximately 375) attends Sunday services.

Since that day in 1953, Laing says his church has never looked back. A year later they committed \$25,000 for missions, but when the commitments were counted officials discovered they had \$35,324 on paper, and \$1,136 more than that at the end of year.

"What made it easy was the fact we had so many of our own faith out in the field," he said.

Laing, who was raised at Blackfalds, and came to the Prophetic Bible Institute at the age of 17 to learn from Aberhart, like another pupil, Ernest Manning, remained to teach and finally became a preacher in 1939.

He has served Bethel on an unbroken basis since 1941, and is one of only two pastors the church has had. The second, Rev. J. W. Sinclair, will leave at the end of June, for Bethel Baptist Church in Red Deer.

With the contemporary church's changing role in society, Laing has definite convictions of his own that some might term outdated. Nevertheless, he firmly believes in the necessity of the church remaining within the confines of a physical plant, especially to carry on youth activities and clubs. "Otherwise we're at the mercy of the schools," he contends.

In line with this belief, he says his church will continue with its satellite development in the city. Pleasant Heights, at 20 Ave. and 14 St. N.W., and Mayland, at 19 St. and 8 Ave. N.E. are two examples. Laing says Bethel has placed a pastor at Mayland on full salary and given him \$36,000 to start a church.

Youth forms a very basic part of the program at Bethel Baptist Church. Laing said they had the first boys' brigade in the west, and now some of its former members have become youth leaders.

He said out of 450 on the Sunday roll call, more than 140 are between junior high and college career ages.

"It's the fundamental program that attracts them," he contends, to a church that has always had a real desire to communicate to youth.

The pastor's challenge with youth is to prove to them that the Bible is as relevant today as the newspaper. "If we can show the young their soul and spirit needs food as badly as their body, than we'll get a well-balanced personality," he says.

He is also convinced the church's downtown location is strategic and vital, because his congregation is metropolitan and comes from every part of Calgary and surrounding area.

"Calgary is a crossroads city in the west, and therefore being downtown enables a church like ours to reach the travelling public."

Laing contends suburbia is moving back downtown, and he worries about the cliff-dwellers in high-rise apartment blocks. "How does the church get into a high-rise?" he asks.

He believes the day is not far off when families will live in these downtown skyscrapers, and then it will have a very real place to fill.

Though time now prevents it, he said he would like to see his church add a physical educator, to meet the needs of some of these folk.

One of his major problems has been keeping up with the work of ministering a downtown pastorate, even though two pastors have been employed for the past 11 years.

The big question he must ask himself is how much time should be spent being a man of God and how much of it should be devoted to the people.

His biggest thrill, he says, is to work with people and see their response to the word of God.