

**W.H. Alexander: A Hero of Our Church**  
**By Susan Ruttan**  
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Let me start with a confession:

I had an idea last summer that we should scrap the name of the W.H. Alexander Award, which is given each year to a hard-working member of our congregation. "The name W.H. Alexander doesn't mean anything to today's members," I thought. Better to call the award the Unitarian of the Year award, or some such plain-language title.

I no longer think that. The research I have done into the history of our church, a history that goes back 98 years this month, has given me a huge appreciation for William Hardy Alexander. He was a giant of a man, as you will hear. But more than that, he was the first of many giants among Edmonton Unitarians. You could say it's a characteristic of this church. We're not a congregational flock of sheep following some charismatic preacher; we're a community of strong individuals who work together to build and sustain a different kind of spiritual home.

I have only to mention a few outstanding members currently active among us to make my point. Bernie Keeler won the Alexander award in 1980, for heaven's sake – that's 30 years ago. He has been the financial helmsman of this church, the man who kept our heads above water for 40 years. Or take Stella Clarke, the 1993 Alexander winner. She has for decades been the person who makes sure someone is available as accompanist every Sunday. In earlier years, she played the piano herself. Now she either recruits pianists or, if she's stuck, she does it herself.

Or consider the wonderful team of volunteers that is helping renovate the former Design 21 office space for our new tenants. Every one of those volunteers is a hero in my eyes.

W.H. Alexander was the original template for that commitment and hard work. Born in Ottawa, he came to Edmonton in 1908 at age 30, the very first professor recruited to teach at the University of Alberta. He taught classics, and he was involved in many aspects of university life, writing a column for the first edition of the Gateway student paper in 1910, teaching the boys how to play rugby, and writing the lyrics to the university's school song. He became a legendary teacher whose students called him Doc Alik. There is today at the U of A a William Hardy Alexander award given each year to an outstanding teacher of undergraduates.

When the First World War broke out, he became a central figure in recruiting students for the forces, and co-authored a newsletter that was sent to U of A students and graduates serving in the trenches.

The founding of the first Unitarian Church in Edmonton was the work of numerous people. W.H. Alexander wasn't even on the first board of the church, which started meeting in May of 1912. Yet in the following months he became very active, spearheading a building committee charged with finding a permanent home for the church. In their first two years, the Unitarians met in rented space in places like the Dreamland movie theatre. Fortunately, they had among their members a prominent developer, William McNamara, who donated two lots in Garneau where a church was built in 1914. When McNamara ran for mayor in 1916 – and won – the church, which had a vote because it was a property owner, returned the favour by voting for him.

The tireless Alexander did much else. Starting in the fall of 1913 he was board

president. He also headed the effort to recruit a minister after the first minister left over some disagreement.

Recruiting a minister in those days involved talking to Unitarian headquarters in Boston, which at that time was the Mother Ship of all congregations. Boston headquarters helped financially support the Edmonton congregation for many years. Alexander got to know the people at headquarters very well, and even visited Boston at least once. His vision of the church extended far beyond Edmonton.

The minister eventually chosen, Charles Potter, was a radical humanist who opposed participation in the Great War. That produced clashes with Alexander, who was commanding officer of the Alberta COTC, the Canadian Officers in Training Corps, and deeply involved in the war effort. I read one account that said that they clashed over prayers for the soldiers at Unitarian church services.

In any case, Potter departed in 1916 and went on to a distinguished career in the United States.

Such clashes were perhaps to be expected as this new church of independent thinkers defined itself. In August 1914, Potter asked the church board whether he should be baptizing infants, after a couple requested that their baby to be baptized. Obviously he was nervous about adopting a Christian ritual. The board wasn't much help: it told him to do what he thought best.

The departure of Potter basically ended professional ministers for the small Edmonton congregation. Just why that was isn't clear, but presumably it was a question of money. Instead, the church turned to W.H. Alexander. The board passed a motion "to continue as at present, President Alexander giving the lecture or securing a substitute." He was paid \$10 a Sunday to give the service or find someone to do it, plus \$25 a month to be the church manager.

Keep in mind that this was late 1916, the height of the war. Alexander was a husband and father, head of the U of A classics department, head of the university war effort, and various other things. One wonders what he was like to be around – whether that enormous energy would suck all the oxygen out of the room. Yet the students loved him. A biography of him on the website of the University of California Berkeley, his final academic home, says of him: His most striking characteristics perhaps were his enthusiasm, gregariousness, and energy.

Among his thousand other activities in those days, Alexander gave a series of Sunday morning talks to students at the U of A. In 1920 he published seven of these talks in a small book called *College and Religion*. These talks are ecumenical in tone, even citing Bible passages, yet they are Unitarian in spirit. Speaking the truth in love, he told the students, is a higher value than traditional religious faith. The talks are also, for their time, inclusive of women. That is not surprising, perhaps, since women were very active members of the First Unitarian Church, including as board members.

In the years to come, Alexander seems to have carried the small church on his back, doing pretty well everything. He even went down to Calgary to help the struggling Unitarian congregation there. In 1921 he tried resigning from his duties as lay minister, but the resignation didn't really stick. The last Unitarian board minutes we have, from 1930, talk about the need to start paying Alexander for the money he was owed for his services.

At the same time, Alexander remained an engaged citizen speaking and acting

on all sorts of issues. He was reportedly a leading spokesman for the anti-temperance cause in Alberta in the early 1920s, going up against the Alberta Bible Belt teetotalers. Alexander was the first president of McKernan Community League, and the league website says of him: Professor Alexander was of the "moderation party"; he clashed with what he called the "prohibition propagandists," arguing that prohibition would surely make the population into "stool pigeons and other non-heroic elements."

Alexander carried on as the Unitarian lay minister until 1934, when finally an interim minister, Carl Storm, was hired. His long service was so remarkable it prompted an article in the Edmonton Journal, which suggested that his 18 years as lay minister must be some kind of record. The paper also suggested that his resignation might have something to do with rumours that he would contest the seat of West Edmonton on behalf of the new CCF party in the upcoming election. Alexander firmly denied that.

What he couldn't deny was that he became in the early 30s a prominent and controversial champion of democratic socialism in general and the CCF in particular. The Journal covered one Unitarian sermon he gave in 1932 in which he said Canada is "being strangled to death by the capitalist octopus which the press has neither the courage nor the power to oppose." "There are more socialists in Canada than ever before, through sheer failure of capitalism, but most of them don't know they are socialists," he said.

One radio talk he gave in Calgary in early 1933 really set off a furore. "Professor Defends Stand on Political Questions" was the Journal headline in January of that year after various right-wing newspapers slammed Alexander for talking about the CCF, while a by-election was happening in Calgary. "The thorny issue as to the extent to which university professors should take part in politics took the spotlight when the editorial protests were expressed in southern Alberta over Dr. Alexander's address," said the Journal.

A public debate ensued over whether a university professor had the right to express political views in a public forum. Alexander's leftist politics were raised in the legislature, and the university board in January 1935 approved a new policy prohibiting full-time professors from participating in active politics. Alexander accepted the new policy, but grumbled that it would not have happened had he been a supporter of the Liberals or Conservatives.

Meanwhile, the Unitarian church was dwindling. When exactly it folded, I don't know; there seems to be no official record, except perhaps in Boston. We do know that the interim minister left in 1936 and that Boston Unitarian headquarters, hit by the Depression, stopped financial support in the late 1930s. We also know that Alexander, having reached the position of Dean of Arts and Science but not university president, left the University of Alberta in 1938 for Berkeley. He told newspaper reporters he was not being driven out by the Social Credit government.

In 1950 Alexander made a brief visit to Edmonton and the Journal wrote a tribute to him. "He was not only a splendid scholar and teacher, but a fearless fighter in unpopular causes, and one of our most stimulating and provocative speakers." He later retired to Edmonton and died here in 1962, at the home on Saskatchewan Drive that he had built in 1911.

One of the lessons of W.H. Alexander is that keeping a small church going takes a ton of work. We who work on behalf of UCE know that very well. Another lesson is

this: a healthy church can't rest on the heroic efforts of one person. It's a bad model, especially since few of us have the energy that Alexander had.

What we need, and what our current church has, are a lot of heroes. That's our model, and it's worked well over the 56-year history of the UCE. Yes, the Keelers have been an important presence in our church, but so have others. Each person who helps with the children's program, or with our current building renovations, is helping create this church. It's a huge effort, keeping our little organization going, but we do it because we love what we have here. This community is an important anchor in our lives. Finally, W.H. Alexander inspires us to be truth-seekers, to stand by the truth even though it may challenge traditional attitudes and habits. Speak the truth in love, he says. Wise words.