

Biafra and the Canadian Churches, 1966-1970

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Much of the history of Africa has been written from a single perspective. Africa, in particular sub-Saharan Africa, is the recipient of the action. Actions initiated first by the slavers, then the colonizing nations, and more recently the commercial and industrial influences of the North. The First World is the subject of the sentence, while Africa remains the object. Little of African history has intentionally sought to turn that sentence around to make Africa the subject of the sentence and the First World the object upon which Africa has exercised influence and caused change. This paper suggests that Africa changed the Canadian church in the second half of the twentieth century.¹ This change was due not only to immigrants, like the Ghanians, coming to Canada, but was also the result of African events that influenced the thinking and action of Canadian churches. A rehearsal of some of the ways African issues have changed the Canadian church will act as proof of this point. The development of the Canadian Food Grains Bank, though not only a response to African food needs, was driven in part by events taking place in Africa. World Vision's 30-Hour Famine transforms thousands of Canadian young people into advocates for the people of Africa and other people of the South. The Inter-Church Coalition on Africa has played a significant role both inside and outside the church. Church voices speaking at shareholders' meetings, were first heard as the churches, along with others, demanded corporations and public institutions exercise ethical responsibility in relationship to the apartheid regime in South Africa. The furor, in the 1970s, around the World Council of Churches' funding of the African National Congress, taught church leaders

the limits to which their constituency would let them go, a lesson learned through their interests in Africa.

This paper is limited to looking at a single African event that changed the Canadian church: the Nigerian civil war, alternatively known as the Biafran crisis.² Further limiting the scope of the paper is its only tangential interest in the aid effort inside the enclave in Eastern Nigeria. The paper is far more interested in asking how the views and actions of Canadian church leaders and church members were affected by the events taking place half a world away. A final limitation is the focus on Protestant church responses, making only passing reference to the Roman Catholic Church. The Presbyterian Church in Canada was the only Canadian denomination to have missionaries in Nigeria at the time of the conflict, therefore Canadian Presbyterians were at the center of the action in Canada as churches responded to the crisis. Naturally Presbyterians will play a prominent role in the story that follows. The Canadian Presbyterians had come to Nigeria in 1954 through a series of joint endeavours with the Church of Scotland who had had missionaries in Nigeria since the 1800s, with Mary Slessor's name being one of the more recognizable.

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious federation. The north is predominantly Hausa/Fulani and Muslim. The eastern part, with its oil reserves, is predominantly Ibo (Igbo) and Christian. Western Nigeria is largely Yoruba, while the central part of the country, where Lagos is located, is a mixture of ethnicities. Eastern Nigeria (Biafra) was in the 1960s, next to South Africa, the most Christianized part of the continent; both Presbyterian and Catholic missionaries had been active in the area for over a century, using education as a primary mission strategy. The majority of Nigeria's doctors, lawyers, teachers, civil servants, and published writers in the 1960s were Ibo. The positions of influence held throughout Nigeria, including in the northern Hausa/Fulani lands created tensions. Additionally, the discovery of oil in eastern Nigeria in 1958 and the economic development that accompanied it, caused some to believe that the Ibo were benefiting unfairly from the wealth that was beginning to come to Nigeria. Beginning in January 1966, a series of military coups ended with General Yakubu Gowon, a Christian from a minority ethnic group, as the military leader of Federal Nigeria. During this upheaval a number of massacres of Ibos occurred in northern Nigeria, even as Ibos sought to flee to the east and safety they were killed. As well, Hausas living in eastern Nigeria were killed. Gowon and the Federal Military Government sought to develop a constitutional framework to hold

Nigeria together. Their centralized approach was consistently rejected by Lieutenant-Colonel Chukuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria. On 30 May 1967 Biafra declared independence and a civil war began.

Biafra understood itself to be a Christian country, with a God-given destiny to be independent. This is clear from the war songs of the time. The lyrics to “We are Biafrans” were:

We are Biafrans Fighting for our nation
In the name of Jesus We shall conquer
Biafra win! Biafra!
We are Biafrans Fighting for our freedom
In the name of Jesus We shall conquer
Biafra win! Biafra!
We are Biafrans Marching to the war front
In the Name of Jesus We shall vanquish
Biafra win! Biafra!³

Biafra’s freedom was part of the will of God, and Ojukwu, “our beloved Moses,” would lead the nation, a David,” against the “Goliath” of Federal Nigeria. Given this religious commitment, the actions of the British government in assisting to arm the Federal Military Government were incomprehensible to those inside Biafra.⁴ “How,” they argued, “could one Christian nation like Great Britain, not support the freedom of another Christian nation, Biafra?”⁵

Canadian Presbyterians were not the only Canadians with close connections to Nigeria. Parliamentarians from Ottawa had deep and varied connections with political leaders and senior civil servants in Nigeria. Mitchell Sharp, Minister of External Affairs, commented, in a small fit of hyperbole, to the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on External Affairs, “I would venture to say that Canada has closer relations with Nigeria than with any other country in the world except Britain. As far as Nigeria is concerned, we are in a sense the second most important country to the United Kingdom itself.”⁶ Canadians were aware of what was happening in Nigeria, and a number had personal connections with Nigerians.

The Rev. E.H. Johnson, Secretary for Overseas Missions, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, appeared before the Standing Committee on External Affairs on 14 March 1968 as an expert witness. A frequent

visitor to Nigeria, Johnson was familiar with political, educational, and religious leaders there. In fact, since June 1967 Johnson and, recently returned Presbyterian missionary, The Rev. Walter McLean, had been warning the External Affairs Department in Ottawa that civil war was brewing in Nigeria. Not until late 1967 did External Affairs take the warnings seriously. From then until early 1968, Johnson and MacLean were in weekly contact with personnel at External Affairs.⁷

Johnson, in his testimony, noted General Gowon was influenced by three groups that exercised “a fair amount of power.” The “northern emirs, that is, the Muslim rulers of the northern states,” Johnson believed were the most influential group.⁸ But when asked by a committee member, “Are we right or wrong in assuming that there is a religious connotation to this civil war?” Johnson replied, “There are some that would try to suggest this is a holy war of Islam against Christianity; I would reject that view.”⁹ Johnson during his testimony in both March and October 1968 never called Biafra a Christian nation, carefully pointing out the role of Christians on both sides of the conflict. Had Johnson misinterpreted Biafra’s self-understanding as a Christian nation? That seems unlikely. Rather, Johnson seeing that Gowon was a Christian, that two-thirds of the Federal Government cabinet was Christian, and that a majority of the Nigerian army was Christian, found it impossible to call it a religious war. With Christians prominent on both sides of the battlelines, with The Presbyterian Church in Canada having contact with leaders on both sides; Johnson believed he and the Canadian churches must remain neutral on the question of Biafran independence, being even-handed in its relationship with both the Federal Military Government and the Biafran government. As well, The Presbyterian Church in Canada still had missionaries in Lagos who were working with Nigerian Christians, many of whom opposed the secession of Biafra.

In his March 1968 appearance before the Standing Committee Johnson reported on observations gained during his January trip to Biafra and Lagos. The war, he argued, was a forgotten war overshadowed by the Middle East crisis and the Vietnam War. As well, the Nigerian federal government’s assertion that this was an internal matter, forced a number of international players, including the United Nations, to the sidelines. Finally, the blockade that existed around Biafra, was not only a munitions and food blockade, it was also an information blockade. Few journalists were getting in and out of Biafra. Johnson described the situation in Biafra as it stood in January 1968, “These people are carrying on and, in spite of

the war, they have managed to grow enough food. Apart from the tremendous problems they have of imports from outside they should be able to carry on in terms of normal food supplies.”¹⁰ Johnson was not overly worried about food and medical supplies getting into Biafra, he was focussed on finding a way to end the war. Thus Johnson had, since returning from Africa, concentrated his “time particularly in talking to people that have the opportunity to form public opinion and to initiate the policy decisions that will lead to constructive actions.”¹¹

By August 1968, the story had changed. The food crisis in Biafra was acute. An estimated 6,000 people, primarily children, were dying daily in Biafra. There were predictions the death rate would rise to 10,000 a day by November. Children were not getting enough protein, and were suffering from kwashiorkor. And suddenly the world was now watching in fascinated horror. When British journalist, Frederick Forsyth, told the Biafra story in June 1968 the world was ready to listen. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had been trying to find ways to get food aid into Biafra, but had run into roadblocks on all sides. The Nigerians wanted to inspect all trucks before they crossed from federal Nigeria into Biafra to ensure that only food, and no arms, were on the vehicles. The Biafran government worried that if they opened up their defences to allow trucks to bring in food aid, the Nigerian army would follow right behind, slipping through the Biafran defences. Therefore trucking the aid was no option. The Red Cross sought to fly food aid into Biafra, but the Nigerian federal government controlled the air space and threatened to shoot down any planes seeking to land inside Biafra. On 5 June 1968, the Nigerians shot down a Red Cross plane in broad daylight.

This halted daytime flights into Biafra; and night flights were impossible. Only Hank Warton and his pilots had the code for the beacon of the Uli airport. They were the only ones who could find the airport in the dark and make the exciting landing with any degree of certainty. Warton was not sharing this crucial information with anyone. An entrepreneur, Warton would fly anything, anywhere for the right price. His planes went into Uli loaded with munitions, food, and people. Given this state of affairs it seemed impossible for anyone, including the ICRC, to mount an airlift of food.

As the situation became increasingly desperate inside Biafra, E. H. Johnson again visited in August 1968. The air blockade was in effect, but a Swedish pilot Count Gustav von Rosen with a load of food aid broke the blockade in a daring flight into and out of the Uli airport. Johnson was on

the flight out of Biafra. In a dramatic moment, Johnson upstaged a Red Cross official, at an ICRC press conference, who was maintaining that the air blockade made it impossible to get food into Biafra. Johnson was living proof that it was possible to fly in and out of Biafra. Far more important than Johnson's witness to the breaking of the blockade, was that the Biafrans had given Johnson the Uli landing codes.

The political landscape now changed; from now on Johnson and The Presbyterian Church in Canada stopped seeking a diplomatic resolution to the conflict, and focussed on feeding the hungry. Canadian Presbyterian missionaries inside Biafra took on roles managing food distribution, and ensuring that medical dispensary and vaccination programs functioned. An interesting combination of players were involved in these projects inside Biafra with Alex Zeidman of the Scott Mission in Toronto being among them. Zeidman commented, "Having returned from service in Biafra I am excited by the way the church has rallied to the challenge presented to it and how Christians the world over have witnessed to their faith in the relief operations in that war-torn part of Africa."¹² Zeidman brought a passionate evangelical faith to the task. Ron McGraw, another Canadian Presbyterian, was widely quoted for his condemnation of the Nigerian government.

The shift in focus was evident in October 1968, as Johnson testified before a Parliamentary Committee. He concluded his forty-minute statement with the rhetorical question, "What is our Canadian role in this?" His answer was two-fold. First, it was "of great importance that we bring relief to both sides in this conflict. In many ways Biafra has the greatest need because it has been blockaded . . . If food is not brought in from outside it is simply not available."¹³ Supplying food to the people of Biafra should become "a major part of our Canadian concern." Johnson hoped that the Canadian Forces would provide Hercules planes to increase the quantity of food being delivered nightly. Second, Canada had a role to play in fact-finding. Johnson called for a Canadian-led team to visit the conflicted region to gather information without assigning blame. This was a shift from March. Diplomacy and political manoeuvring were set aside, the need was for food instantly. Johnson was also far less hopeful about the possibilities of a peaceful solution to the conflict. He sought remain neutral on the question of Biafra's political goals, but his pre-occupation with the crushing food needs of Biafra, meant that he was regarded as pro-Biafran. No longer was External Affairs being asked to use their "good offices" to encourage a diplomatic solution to the war. The goal was to get

the Canadian government directly involved in responding to the humanitarian crisis.¹⁴

Two other things had happened since Johnson had spoken to the Committee in March. First, there had been a change in Prime Minister, with Pierre Trudeau succeeding Lester Pearson. Trudeau did not seem particularly concerned about Biafra. When asked about Biafra during the summer of 1968, Trudeau had shrugged his shoulders, asking, "Where is Biafra?" The second change was that two Members of Parliament, Andrew Brewin and David MacDonald, had visited Biafra in early October 1968. Brewin, a New Democrat and an Anglican, represented a Toronto riding. David MacDonald, a United Church minister, was a Conservative representing a Prince Edward Island constituency. Both had been delegates at the World Council of Churches meeting in New Dehli, there they had made the acquaintance of E.H. Johnson. Brewin and MacDonald later wrote a book about Canada's involvement with the Biafran tragedy.¹⁵

Canadian politicians and church leaders believed they could push for food aid for the starving in Biafra and remain honest brokers between the two parties in the conflict. But Christians, both ex-patriot and Nigerian, living on the Federal side of the frontlines, were not so sure of the churches' neutrality in this conflict. Dorothy Roberts clearly expressed her concerns to Johnson in August 1968,

. . . the word mission, missionary, church, or anything that smells of it is definitely in bad taste to the point where we do absolutely nothing unless it is through the Nigerian Red Cross. This is foci enough--we have gotten the message--if we want to stay so that our people know their church has not deserted them when they needed help we will do this.¹⁶

Roberts was concerned that Canadian Presbyterian relief efforts were focussed on getting aid into Biafra. Aid was needed in areas the federal forces were occupying, areas which were formerly Biafra and peopled by Christian refugees. The very public criticism Canadian Presbyterian missionaries in Biafra, like Ron McGraw and Colin MacDonald, directed against federal Nigeria had devastating impacts for Nigerian Presbyterians in the occupied areas. Roberts asserted Nigerian troops viewed these criticism as being the voice of all Presbyterians. Therefore Presbyterians were regarded as enemies of the Nigerian federal government. As well, Nigerian Christians were very aware of the coverage the war was getting

in the world press. Roberts wanted the *Presbyterian Record* to be far more careful in its coverage of the conflict. She asked that “the *Record* read not Biafra only but at least Nigeria/Biafra.” Roberts bluntly described the attitude she perceived among Canadian Presbyterians, “To hell with the Efik-Ibibio side of our church which was at least half if not two-third of its membership, as long as we don’t offend the Biafrans, seems to be the motto.”¹⁷

Stung by this criticism, Johnson maintained that he and the church as a whole were being balanced. He wrote,

I am a little disturbed by Dorothy’s thought that the thinking of our Church or of our Board is oriented only to the other side . . . It has been suggested that our policy is determined by church friends on the Biafra side. May I assure you that this thought is entirely mistaken. We feel that we have a very great obligation to support church friends there in the midst of the terrible suffering which has come upon them and we feel equally that we have a responsibility to work with our church friends in Federal Nigeria with particular concern for those who are in the areas which have recently come under federal control and have suffered the ravages of war.¹⁸

Johnson believed he was a neutral player, able to carry on dialogues with delegations from both sides of Nigerian Civil War, and describing a “very good conversation” he had with Mr. Sanusi, the Nigerian High Commissioner in Ottawa. Johnson was naive about how the church would be perceived. He failed to recognize that by choosing to intervene at all, meant that one side or the other would regard this as taking sides. Johnson was slow to grasp that words spoken and printed in Canada did have an impact in Nigeria. He believed that the Canadian churches could remain above the political fray, holding a neutral position. There was a touch of paternalistic hubris to this belief.

An interview with David MacDonald, following his 36-hour visit to Biafra, was published in *United Church Observer*, entitled, “I call it Genocide.” Referring to a fact-finding team sent to Nigeria by the Canadian External Affairs Department, MacDonald said, “The team went to Nigeria at the Nigerian government’s invitation, and they saw what the government wanted them to see. They say the charge of genocide isn’t warranted. I say it is. Certainly the Biafrans believe that the Nigerian government wants to exterminate them.”¹⁹ L.M. Beckham, a Canadian and head of anaesthesia at University College Hospital, Ibadan, Nigeria, after

praising Trudeau's "proper politic policy" wrote a word of warning in a later issue of the *Observer*, "Canadians should remember that in developing countries most projects are controlled by the government . . . Consequently, when anyone, no matter how far removed from the government, speaks [their] mind, it is accepted as Canadian policy."²⁰ Clearly E.H. Johnson was not the only one facing the challenge of being thought to be an official spokesperson rather than a well-informed private commentator.

In the summer of 1968, a coalition of Canadian groups came together with the goal of getting food aid into Biafra. The Nigeria/Biafra Relief Fund of Canada was a combination of Christian groups, aid agencies, and concerned citizens.²¹ They hoped to convince the federal government, which had planes, to second some of their resources to the food and medicine airlift. In late October the government did in fact send a Hercules aircraft and crew to Fernando Po, an island about thirty minutes flying time from the Nigerian coast, to join the ICRC air lift. The Hercules flew only eight missions into Biafra, before the Canadian government withdrew it. The expressed reason was that the Port Harcourt airport had been captured by the Nigerians, and the Uli airport, which was simply a strip of highway with the trees around it removed, was unable to handle the Hercules. Therefore, the government argued there was no purpose to be served in keeping planes at Fernando Po. At the same time, the Nigerian federal government was pressuring the Canadian government to withdraw the Hercules. The presence of Canadian government planes, the Nigerians argued was a *de facto* recognition of Biafra as an independent state. The Nigerians maintained that the Biafra-Nigerians conflict was an internal Nigerian matter and therefore the Canadian government, nor any other government should become involved in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. The Biafra lobby group based in Canada was convinced this pressure got through to the Canadian government, and the Canadians backed down. In any case, the withdrawal of the Hercules was a major blow to Canadians hoping to get aid into Biafra.

Through the summer of 1968 a group of European churches, primarily Scandinavian and German, put together a coalition of churches and agencies to form Joint Church Aid. JCA was affectionately called Jesus Christ Air by the air crews. JCA flew out of the Portugese island of Sao Tome, approximately an hour's flight time due south of the Nigerian coast. Caritas Internationalis, the Catholic Relief agency, had been flying food out of Sao Tome since May. This second airlift was controversial and, in the eyes of the Nigerians, illegal according to international law.

Since the flights were going into Uli without Federal government sanction, and since the food was being flown in by Hank Warton's team, which also flew in arms for the Biafrans, the planes were legitimate military targets. This made day time flights into Biafra originating in Sao Tome dangerous, and night flights into Biafra were only possible for those who had the landing codes of the Uli airport. As noted above, in August 1968, Johnson was given the landing codes. Now Caritas and JCA and other aid groups could fly their own planes into Uli at night without dealing with Hank Warton. The whole complexion of the Biafran situation changed. The churches did not need to wait on the slow pace of negotiations between the ICRC and the Nigerian Federal Government, they could start their own airlift.

Embarrassed by the Canadian government's withdrawal of the Hercules, a number of concerned Canadians were casting around for a way to respond to the growing crisis. Jack Grant, a Jewish businessman, came to E.H. Johnson in November 1968 with a proposal. If the Canadian government would not fly aid into Biafra, what was to stop Canadians concerned about the issue from buying a plane and flying aid into Biafra. Johnson pulled in The Rev. Eoin S. Mackay of Rosedale Presbyterian Church, one of the wealthier and more mission-minded congregations in Toronto, to chair this new venture. Oxfam Canada was also a lead player. The group worked feverishly through the holiday season, meeting 23 and 27 December and 2 January.²² The group called itself Canairelief. Another shift had taken place. Those closest to the Biafran crisis were no longer willing to wait for the Canadian government. The time for pressure tactics was over, it was time to act.

The challenges in operating Canairelief were enormous. A plane had to be found, and crewed to operate half a world away. That meant finding the necessary financial resources to mount such an operation for the initial three months. This required a focussed publicity campaign. Finally, Canairelief needed to deal with the criticism that would inevitably be part of this endeavour.

Through Nordair a plane was acquired, and so was a crew. A Flight Operations director was brought on board. Eventually, Nordair was contracted to handle all flight operations on the five planes Canairelief operated. Canairelief flew L-1049H Super Constellations. The "Connies" could carry twenty tons of food and medicine each flight. They rarely carried more than seventeen tons of aid; extra fuel was needed for the routine circling of the Uli airport caused by the stacking of planes. The

Canairelief Connies had the largest capacity of any of the planes in JCA. The airlift into Biafra still stands as the largest non-military airlift in world history.

To face the fund-raising challenge, the executive committee brought in a public relations expert, Ardel McKenna, to develop a comprehensive campaign for Canairelief. A series of print ads ran in local newspapers and news magazines. One dramatic full page magazine ad was black on the top two-thirds of the page with the words, in white, "WHO CARES." Across the bottom of the page red "BIAFRA" appeared, with blood dripping from the letters. Superimposed on the blood in small block letters were the words, "Every night Canairelief feeds almost one million people one small meal. One flight costs \$4200.00. \$15.00 feeds one thousand people. We need your help." The ad included the address and phone number of the Canairelief Toronto office.²³ A four-fold legal size brochure was widely distributed, inviting readers to "Be part of Canada's First Air Relief Service." Contending that "Men, women, and children--a race of human beings--face death and extermination" Canadians were urged to make a difference. "Take one airplane . . . a brave crew . . . add a mountain of faith . . . and YOU! What do we have?--a team--a team called 'CANAIRELIEF.'"²⁴ Included in the fund-raising campaign were table place-mats that could be used at church events promoting Canairelief. The powder blue place-mats depicted a Canairelief Super-Constellation in flight in dark blue, with the words "Constellation of Compassion." On the place-mat were the stylized double fish of the Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service section of the World Council of Churches.²⁵ In addition to print material there were scripts for radio interviews. The scripts worked two ways. They gave interviewees answers to questions they might be asked. The questions provided interviewers, who often had little knowledge of Biafra, with a framework for their interviews.

As 10 January 1969 approached, when the first Canairelief plane was to leave, there were furious negotiations with the *Toronto Star* to second a reporter to the endeavour. Peter Worthington was to fly out, to report regularly on what was taking place. Canairelief was to provide transportation to and from Sao Tome and in and out of Biafra, the rest of the expenses would be the *Star's* responsibility. The arrangement fell apart at the last minute. Worthington thought he had exclusive access for three months, something Canairelief was not prepared to offer.

The publicity and fund-raising plan was very intentional. The leadership of Canairelief was very direct about its objectives, aggressively

going after its goals. Despite the miscommunication with the *Star*, the Canairelief team was media savvy; by mid-February 1969, they have been able to get major news stories into a number of Toronto papers.

The press was sympathetic towards Canairelief. The *Toronto Star* of 21 February 1969 was typical of the media's view,

The barrenness of the Prime Minister's concern and that of External Affairs Minister Mitchell Sharp is being laid bare for the Canadian people. A small group of church leaders, having asked Ottawa for help and been refused, have gone ahead on their own and made an impressive contribution to saving lives in the Nigerian-Biafran tragedy.²⁶

The editorial took direct aim at Prime Minister Trudeau, "Last summer asked about the crisis in Biafra, he [Trudeau] shrugged, "Where's Biafra?" If he still doesn't know, let him ask the churchmen."²⁷ The majority of the media were on the side of the churches, and regarded the Federal Government's inaction inhumane.

Johnson was no longer afraid to take on the government publicly. When asked by the *Globe and Mail*, "What is Ottawa's current thinking about aid to Biafra?" Johnson was unequivocal, "Ottawa has never changed its mind. It wants to take a neutral stand, so it has confined its aid to the International Red Cross. Actually, I think the church groups of Sao Tome have proved by now that theirs is the most effective way of getting supplies through."²⁸ Johnson no longer had any expectations that the government would ever respond, the time for neutrality was gone, it was time to feed the hungry, an act that was more important than the fine points of diplomacy.

Just because Johnson was convinced the exciting night flights into the Uli airport were the way to respond to the crisis, did not mean that other Canadian churches agreed. The Anglican Church was wary of Canairelief. The General Secretary, Archdeacon E.S. Light, stated, "I think it would be irresponsible to get behind something which will fall flat on its face in a couple of weeks."²⁹ Anglicans, while concerned about the plight of the children of Biafra, wanted more information about Canairelief before making an official commitment. The United Church of Canada held a similar position. The *Observer* noted that while The Presbyterian Church in Canada and Oxfam had purchased a plane to fly "relief supplies" into Biafra, neither the United Church and the Anglican Church were formally

involved. Both churches had sent money through the World Council of Churches, which provided “relief to both sides.”³⁰

The Canairelief operation was an adventure in every sense of the word. Decisions were made not on the basis of funds in the bank, but on the basis of what would best meet the goal of feeding the people of Biafra. Flying into the Uli airport was an adventure. The presence of “Intruders” (Nigerian Federal Government fighters and bombers) meant relief planes could only land at night, with a minimum of light. The first flight out of Sao Tome each night was scheduled to arrive over the Nigerian coast after dark. Twenty minutes before making landfall, all external lights and cabin lights were extinguished. The only light allowed was the captain’s penlight flashlight to read maps. Thirty minutes more flying brought the plane over the Uli beacon. If it was the first flight of the night and there were no intruders, it would land. If there were intruders or the runway was occupied, the flight joined the other planes circling south-east of the airport, until the Uli control tower told the crew to land. It was not until the plane was at an altitude of 1,000 feet, that the pilot would ask the control tower to turn on the runway lights and would turn on the plane’s lights. As soon as a plane had landed and the engines were reversed, the control tower was radioed to turn off the runway lights. The plane taxied to the unloading area, where a minimum amount of light was used. The goal was to have the last flight of the night back over the Atlantic before dawn. On a good night, Uli airport could handle thirty flights, with some planes making two trips a night.³¹

On the night of 3 August 1969, Canairelief plane CF-NAJ crashed in its final approach to Uli airport killing all on board. There were no “intruders” in the air space over Uli; rather it is likely with no lights on the ground Captain Donald Merriam miscalculated where he was, flying into a ridge fifteen kilometers north of the Uli airport. Merriam, an experienced pilot, had seen action in World War II. The death of the four-member Canadian crew (Merriam, First Officer Raymond Levesque, Flight Engineer Vincent Wakeling, and Loadmaster Gary Libbus) was front page news in the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*.³² The *Globe and Mail* eulogized the crew:

Heroism has different degrees of nobility, but surely at the top of the scale must be that of those who venture into great danger, not to serve nationalism, but the cause of those too weak to serve themselves . . . They knew the risks they took. They took them because they put the

suffering of a brave and independent people above their own safety. Canadians can show pride in their sacrifice only by keeping the rest of Canairelief's planes filled and flying.³³

The risks inherent in the operation were worth it since a higher good was being served. The crash, while tragic, further advanced the profile of Canairelief across Canada.

Canadians had a growing concern for Biafra as 1969 came to a close. Hugh McCullum, the editor of the Anglican *Canadian Churchman*, visited Biafra that fall and upon returning to Canada wrote powerful articles about his experiences. These articles, appearing in the *Churchman* and the *United Church Observer*, moved the Anglican Church in Canada from critical observer into supporter of Canairelief.³⁴ The increased public pressure pushed External Affairs to action. On 9 January 1970 the department announced an additional \$2.5 million would be put into Biafran aid, \$500,000 going to Canairelief.

With surprising suddenness the war was over on 12 January 1970. Biafran resistance completely collapsed, and Okujwu and his closest aides flew to Gabon and went into exile. Two to three days before the collapse, many ex-patriot aid workers inside Biafra, sensed that the end was near, and flew out on the JCA flights returning empty to Sao Tome. Joint Church Aid, with its contacts inside the former Biafra, offered to continue flying food aid into Biafra for the Nigerian government to distribute. Their offer was turned down. The adventure was over.

During the twenty-month airlift, 85,000 tons of food and medicine were flown into Biafra. The ICRC had flown in some 21,000 tons, while the coalition flying out of Sao Tome had taken nearly 60,000 tons of food and medicine into the blockaded territory. Canairelief planes had flown a total of 677 flights into Biafra, 13% of all relief flights out of Sao Tome. Given the size of the Connies, they had taken in about 20% of all the food aid.³⁵ The thirteen-month adventure had cost \$3.25 million, two-thirds of which had been raised by Canadian organizations. The other third came from other relief agencies buying load capacity of Canairelief flights. The funds the Canadian government announced three days before the end of the war were never given to Canairelief. The government argued that the funds had been earmarked for future Canairelief operations, operations which never took place. Nonetheless, the organization had never gone to the bank to borrow funds, because "money was provided by daily miracles."³⁶

As the situation in Biafra became increasingly grave, and as a growing number of Canadians told eye-witness accounts of the events taking place in Biafra, church leaders and other Canadians were no longer able to sit back and wait. The development of Canairelief became a model for concerned Canadians to address substantial international concerns outside of direct Canadian government action. Seeing a situation that demanded action, concerned Canadians took action, building a coalition of like-minded individuals. This coalition shared only one commonality, a desire to feed the hungry in Biafra. Coalition building around a single cause became a model for future action. A similar approach was used in the development of Joint Church Aid; those prepared to act, regardless of the niceties of international law and diplomatic protocol worked together. It was a coalition for a particular time and place, the next situation would be responded to by a new coalition with a new set of players involved. Not all the players in the Nigeria/Biafra Relief Fund nor in Canairelief were Christians or even involved in the relief effort for religious reasons. The language used by the coalition partners was not faith language; instead they used the language of humanitarian need. This was the language used in publicity about Canairelief; it was also the language key figures such as E.H. Johnson used in addressing political groups such as the Standing Committee on External Affairs.

It is noteworthy that the key players in the relief effort were from Ireland, Canada, and various Scandinavian countries. It is true that Irish and Canadian missionaries were on the ground in Biafra, but the citizens of these countries were also in a position economically to help. The governments in these country were not major world powers who had to worry about their citizens involvement in Biafra throwing balances of power out of kilter. The coalition partners believed that because they were non-government organizations, whose sole goal was to feed the hungry, their help would be welcomed by all parties, including the Nigerians. JCA was shocked to discover that they were *persona non grata* in Nigeria following the end of the war. Not only was their help not needed, it was not wanted. The Canadian missionaries and church leaders learned that the way they saw themselves, and the way they were perceived by the world at large, were two very different things. The distinction that Canadian church leaders saw between personal speech and action on the one hand, and official speech and action on the other hand, was not a distinction that the Nigerians recognized. The churches involved with JCA learned that they were seen as political players by both sides in the conflict regardless

of how much the churches insisted they were not supporting one side over the other.

The Biafran conflict gave the Canadian church a new way to understand its mission. Ntieyong Akpan, Head of the Civil Service of Eastern Nigeria during the Biafran crisis, wrote in his account of the Nigerian Civil War,

the Christian church has often in the past been charged with indifference in their mission to humanity, particularly in areas of human suffering. If, as a result of the Nigerian civil war, a precedent has been set for Christian courage and conviction then not just Christianity but the world it is supposed to serve have stood to gain for the future.³⁷

The mainline church in Canada, which had been struggling to understand its mission role in the world, suddenly found a way to re-formulate that mission in terms acceptable to an increasingly multi-cultural Canada and in a world that was becoming ever more accepting of a wide variety of faith commitments. The church could find a new mission in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and healing the sick. Canadian churches could bravely step on to the international stage as non-governmental organizations who had learned to live their faith by speaking the language of humanitarian need.

Endnotes

1. Robert Wright, *A World Mission: Canadian Protestantism and the Quest for a New International Order, 1918-1939* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1991) notes responses to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, arguably the first African event to galvanize Canadian church action (216-217).
2. Laurie S. Wiseberg, "Christian Churches and the Nigerian Civil War," *Journal of African Studies* 2, No. 3 (Fall 1975): 297-332 uses a social science approach to examine how the churches changed government policy. Another voice that needs to be heard is Alex deWaal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Indianapolis: James Currey and Indiana University Press, 1998) who argues, "One episode in modern times stands out as a formative experience in contemporary humanitarianism: Biafra. An entire generation of NGO relief workers was moulded by Biafra, and several agencies were either born from the relief operation or forever changed by it. Biafra is totemic for contemporary relief: it was an unsurpassed effort in terms

of logistical achievement and sheer physical courage. But Biafra is also a taboo: the ethical issues that it raises have still to be faced" (72-73). Supporting deWaal's contention is the fact that Marjorie Ross, a Canadian Presbyterian who lived and worked in Lagos during the Biafran crisis, wrote an article "Setting the Table for all God's People: Canadian Churches and Development," in *Canadian Churches and Foreign Policy*, ed. Bonnie Greene (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Publishers, 1990) never mentioning Biafra. Nor does any other writer in the book. It is remarkable that Biafra would not be discussed in a book exploring Canadian church responses to foreign policy issues.

3. J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, "Lore from Friction: Praise and Protest in Biafran War Songs," *Anthropos* 91, 4-6 (1996): 527. This was one of many songs that made explicit Biafra's fight for freedom as a Christian struggle.
4. Andrew F. Walls, "Religion and the press in 'the Enclave' in the Nigerian Civil War," School of Oriental and African Studies, Unpublished paper, 1973.
5. One of the novels about the Biafran crisis is Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn: A Novel of the Biafran War* (London: Fontana Books, 1976). Ike writes: "Even the BBC was compelled to carry the first-hand account of the Presbyterian clergyman from Canada who was eyewitness to the senseless bombing of the Mary Slessor Hospital by the vandals" (190).
6. Quoted in Andrew Brewin and David MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy* (Toronto: James Lewis & Samuel, Publishers, 1970), 37. Sharp must have momentarily forgotten about the Canadian-American relationship, if could describe the Nigerian connection as Canada's second strongest international relationship.
7. Donald Barry, "Interest Groups in the Canadian Foreign Policy Formulation Process: The Case of Biafra," (M.A. Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1970), 33. See also Barry, "Interest Groups and the Foreign Policy Process: The Case of Biafra," *Pressure Group Behaviour in Canadian Politics*, ed. A. Paul Pross (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd, 1975), 117-147. Barry argues for two distinct phases in the lobbying efforts. In the period June 1967 to June 1968, the focus was lobbying relevant government decision makers. In July to December 1968, the focus shifted to mobilizing the public to action. For the churches involved with Canairelief there was a third period, November 1968 to January 1970, when the decision had been made to just do it.
8. *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence*, Standing Committee on External Affairs, 14 March 1968, 350.
9. *Minutes*, External Affairs Committee, 14 March 1968, 367.

10. *Minutes*, External Affairs Committee, 14 March 1968, 348.
11. *Minutes*, External Affairs Committee, 14 March 1968, 345.
12. "You helped me feed the Biafrans," *The Presbyterian Record*, June 1969, 8.
13. *Minutes*, External Affairs Committee, 15 October 1968, 199. (By October 1968 Brewin and Macdonald had been to Biafra, and were on the External Affairs Committee.)
14. *Minutes*, External Affairs Committee, 15 October 1968, 192-200.
15. Brewin and McDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, passim.
16. Dorothy Roberts to E. H. Johnson, 8 August 1968, File A-v-23, E.H. Johnson Papers, The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives (hereafter PCCA).
17. Roberts to Rodger Talbot, 8 August 1968, File A-v-23, Johnson Papers, PCCA.
18. Johnson to Earle and Dorothy Roberts, 17 September 1968, File A-v-23, Johnson Papers, PCCA.
19. Interview with David MacDonald, "I Call it Genocide," *United Church Observer*, 1 November 1969, 29.
20. L.M. Beckham, "Backtalk on Visit to Biafra," *United Church Observer*, 15 March 1969, 36.
21. Minutes, Nigeria/Biafra Relief Fund of Canada, 15 July 1968, 5, File A-iii-41, Johnson Papers, PCCA.
22. Minutes, Executive Committee, Canairelief, 23, 27 December 1968 and 2 January 1969, File A-iii-6, E.H. Johnson Papers, PCCA.
23. File: A-iii-14, Johnson Papers, PCCA.
24. File: A-iii-15, Johnson Papers, PCCA.
25. File: A-iii-13, Johnson Papers, PCCA.
26. *Toronto Star*, 21 February 1969.
27. *Toronto Star*, 21 February 1969.
28. *Globe and Mail*, 19 February 1969.
29. *Canadian Churchman*, January 1969, 6.
30. *The United Church Observer*, 1 February 1969, 33-34.

31. Hugh G. Lloyd, Mona L. Mollerup, Carl A. Bratved, *The Nordchurchaid Airlift to Biafra: 1968-1970: An Operations Report* (Copenhagen: Folkekirkens Nodhjaelp, 1972), 124, 128.
32. *Globe and Mail*, 5 August 1969, 1; and *Toronto Star*, 5 August 1969, 1.
33. *Globe and Mail*, editorial, 5 August 1969.
34. Hugh McCullum, "Biafra: An Obituary," *United Church Observer*, 15 February 1970, 12-15.
35. Michael I. Draper, *Shadows: Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria, 1967-1970* (Aldershot, Great Britain: Hikoki Publications Ltd., 1999), 276-277.
36. Financial Statement, Canairelief, File A-iii-7, Johnson Papers, PCCA. In 2002 figures, this would be a \$15 million operation. It never had more than a couple of weeks funds on hand.
37. Ntiyong U. Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970: A Personal Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd., 1972), 162.

