

History of VOWR

Radio station VOWR broadcasts from studios located in Wesley United Church in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. The station's first broadcast occurred on July 24, 1924, when Newfoundland was a country unto itself and some 25 years before confederation with Canada when it became Canada's tenth Province. The founder of VOWR was the Reverend Dr. J.G. Joyce, Minister at Wesley United Church (then Wesley Methodist Church) from 1922 until 1930. Reverend Joyce was a native Newfoundlander, born in Carbonear, Newfoundland in 1889. This remarkable Pastor looked for ways to communicate the gospel message to members of the Wesley United Church congregation, many of whom were unable to attend regular worship services for various reasons due to age and infirmity etc. Rev. Joyce 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.

As a first step, Joyce had to overcome opposition to the idea of radio broadcasting from the church by the highly conservative church community of the time, who felt that such activity must surely be the Devil's own work. Joyce persevered however and funds were solicited from businesses and the public, in the City of St. John's, throughout Newfoundland and elsewhere and by June 1924 more than \$1000 had been collected to finance the project.

The station had its inaugural broadcast in July 1924, just 23 years after Marconi received the first wireless signal at historic Signal Hill located adjacent to the mouth of St. John's Harbour. The station was then known as 8WMC, which stood for **W**esley **M**ethodist **C**hurch, and was powered by a 100-watt transmitter. 8WMC started broadcasting Sunday morning and evening church services only. At that time it was the first and (then) only church run radio station in North America and the fourth oldest radio station of any type on the eastern seaboard of North America. This radio station, originally being almost exclusively religious in content, was established before

Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada in 1949 and is protected under the terms of that union. No new religious stations were allowed for many years afterwards in Canada.

As it is today, the station's original motto was 'We Serve'. Rev. Joyce foresaw the use of radio as a religious/cultural medium with an ecumenical focus from the outset and ecumenism remains a key feature of VOWR to this day. The station does not charge for use of services by any church group, but accepts donations to support expenses. An early example of the spirit of ecumenism associated with VOWR took place when the first aerial located in the churchyard was strung between two 100-foot high wooden poles, one supplied by an Anglican, the other by a Roman Catholic. A Methodist supervised the installation of the aerial array.

The initial transmitter did not prove powerful enough to reach more distant and remote areas. In preparation for purchasing a newer and more powerful transmitter, 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'*.

Soon, a 500-watt transmitter was purchased using donations received from 'all quarters' of the public 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.

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 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 the station. In 1928 Dr. Joyce turned down an offer of a \$5,000 donation, 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.*

Many interests beyond Wesley United Church were attracted by the potential for radio, to serve the needs of education and entertainment as well as religion. To address these interests, a public meeting was called in 1928 and a program committee of community representatives of '*public spirited men of all denominations*' was set up to arrange 'appropriate' programming. After appointment of this committee the station went on the air at least two nights a week and religious programming was expanded as other churches and denominations were given access to the station's facilities. 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.

The station has had a long history of broadcasting during disasters and to those in remote and isolated areas. During the first week the station was on the air, it was called upon to reach people living along the coast and in the interior to search for the missing airplane the 'Dawn'. Station 8WMC continued to provide a public service, being the only means of communication to the area affected by the Burin Peninsula tidal wave on the South coast of Newfoundland in November 1929. Also during the S.S. Viking disaster during the 1931 seal hunt when an explosion occurred at sea, the station was on the air broadcasting messages of support and the names of survivors. In 1929 the storm tossed schooner Mack Lake was taken in tow by S. S. Malakoff, and towed to the safety of the harbour in the Town of Port Union. 8WMC broadcast the good news of the ships safety to the families and relatives of the crew.

Rev. Joyce and a small group of volunteers including the Wesley United Church Boy Scouts, built small crystal radio sets for mariners at sea and some local listeners which were provided at minimal cost. 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.' At the suggestion of a local newspaper, radio receiving sets were provided, through the generosity of the public, to sealing ships in 1927. Ships crews appreciated the church services broadcast while they were at sea. Captain Solomon White of the vessel 'Lone Flier' wrote of receiving the signal and listening to a church service 165 miles out to sea from St. John's during the seal hunt of 1929: '*All hands would be back in the cabin of the vessel waiting to hear the first note of the organ. I don't think we lost one service or concert*'. Rev. Joyce wrote: '*sealing captains stop their steamer at the ice fields in order to permit their crews of two hundred men or more to listen to religious services.*' Also lighthouse keepers on remote sites and loggers working in the logging camps tuned to 8WMC regularly, to listen to broadcasts of Church Services.

The call letters 'VO' were assigned to the Country of Newfoundland 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!). The station's transmitting power was increased to 1000 watts in 1948, again completely funded by public donations. Although having completed his Ministry at Wesley United Church in 1930, Rev. Dr. Joyce returned to St. John's from his posting Quebec to 'throw the switch' for the new transmitter. VOWR purchased 32 acres of land on Mt. Scio, overlooking the City of St. John's, for construction of a tower and antenna and relocation of the station's transmitter in July 1954.

The station celebrated its 30th anniversary in October that same year, with Rev. Dr. Joyce again returning to preside over a memorial service. New studios were constructed in 1959 and dedicated to Rev. Joyce who passed away earlier that year. Today, this studio contains a display of radio communication equipment from the 1920's and 1930's as well as a bust of Rev. Dr. Joyce and period photographs of the station's past.

VOWR has, from its very beginning, been run by volunteers and has derived its support from the generous donations from the public, business community and various religious denominations. In the early days of the station's history, donations to the station came in many forms, both in cash and in kind. Some in kind contributions came in the form of

donations of barrels of potatoes from farmers, portions of fisherman's seasons catch or perhaps a donation of a quarter ton of coal. These and other donations could be either used directly or converted into cash to help offset the station's expenses. In 1928, an article in the New York Herald tribune noted that '*Station 8WMC become an establishment, and subscriptions came in from men of all creeds, ranging from a few cents by a grateful listener, to the larger donation of the wealthy.*'

In 1982, 165 feet of the Station's 215 foot broadcast tower toppled in a storm. The response to an appeal to the general public for funding quickly raised \$45,000 for repairs. In 1998 VOWR completed construction of a \$100,000 extension to the Station's studio. Through the generous support of the public, the entire debt was retired two years later in 2000. VOWR actively raises funds for its operation primarily through a radio auction, held annually since 1947. The radio auction features every imaginable item from baked goods, donations of products and services from businesses of many kinds, local delicacies of fish and game, all auctioned off in a special broadcast with the willing public telephoning in bids on their favorite items. For many years a sale of take-out turkey cold plates was carried out annually and was eagerly anticipated by the station's supporters. Public donations also include frequent bequests and trust funds specified in people's wills, which are to be left specifically VOWR after their passing. Some sponsorships from local area businesses supplement the donations from the public and the other fundraising activities.

VOWR also has enjoyed a unique relationship with commercial broadcasters. For example, VOWR lent its transmitting facility to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) for a month or so after that corporation's antenna blew down in a sleet storm in 1958. Later that same year, CBC provided VOWR with materials to construct a temporary antenna when VOWR's 215 foot antenna was damaged in hurricane force winds. Over the years VOWR has received numerous donations of music and equipment from other local broadcasters as well.

In 1979 the station increased its transmitting power to 10,000 watts. By 1989 VOWR was broadcasting 65 hours a week, which increased in 1994 to 106 hours a week. In 1997 the station began broadcasting 24 hours a day at 800 kHz on the AM dial.

Currently a staff of 75-80 people from all walks of life and religious denominations runs

the station. VOWR now boasts a computerized inventory of some 202,200 pieces of music with many more musical selections not yet catalogued. All of the staff are volunteers and there are no salaried employees.

VOWR today features a wide variety of programming. Some 20% of the programming continues in the station's tradition of religious broadcasting, including live and taped church services from the City of St. John's area, taped programs from elsewhere, sacred music programs and programs of meditation. Other programming includes musical shows featuring classical, country and western, military march selections, popular music and music from the 1940's and 1950's; a guest interview show; a gardening show; a program for seniors; and a morning show of music, news and weather. In its 82nd continuous year of broadcasting, VOWR continues to occupy a significant spot in the field of radio broadcasting. With the development of this web site, the little 100 watt radio station that started in a corner of a church basement in 1924 can now be heard anywhere around the globe.

For all of the technological advances that the station has undergone however, the spirit of the station both in terms of its volunteers and programming may still be summed up by the following words that were written about VOWR many years ago:

'I am your radio station. In the quiet moments of your life when Sabbath calm replaces the noise and strain of the week's striving, I seek you across lakes and forests, over mountains and seas. I find my way into your homes, into your lighthouses, where you live lonely lives that others may pursue their course in safety: into your logging camps, into your ships as you sail along your rugged coast or hunt the seal on the ice floes. I seek you everywhere, regardless of your class or creed. I remind you of a love that is deeper than the deepest ocean. I sing you the songs of the spirit I am VOWR - your station!'