

History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland

Witness in Ontario

The Free Church in Canada

After the Great Disruption of 1843 in Scotland, many Presbyterians in Canada were in sympathy with the newly formed Free Church of Scotland, and joined it in 1844. By 1861 the Free Church had grown to approximately 150,000 adherents or about 10% of the population of Canada West (Ontario).

The Free Church traced its lineage to John Knox, the First and Second Reformations in Scotland, the Covenanters and to Scotland's most eminent divines – and it was often the loudest voice in Canada decrying the ills of popery, intemperance and Sabbath breaking¹.

Union of 1861

In 1861, a union took place between the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church to form the Canada Presbyterian Church. The union had been opposed by a number of Free Church men, most notably Rev. John Bayne of Galt, who proved to be a “watchman of the wall” for the Free Church, but he passed away in 1859. In the Union of 1861, Arminianism was placed, at least, on an equal platform with Calvinism. In addition, the Free Church had from its inception held to the Establishment Principle, advocating a national recognition of the true religion, the obligation of the civil magistrate to establish and support the true Church of Christ in the land, and the independence of the church from all civil interference in her internal ecclesiastical affairs. This was nothing more than the doctrine of the original 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith, which states that the civil magistrate has the duty “to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered and observed” (Westminster Confession of Faith, 23.3). The United Presbyterian Church had departed from this position and were Voluntaries, advocating the separation of church and state. As a result of the Union of 1861, the original position of the Free Church with respect to the Headship of Christ over the Church and the nations, was dropped.

¹ The Free Church in Victorian Canada 1844 – 1861 by Richard W. Vaudry

This caused the people of Lochalsh and North Line, Kincardine to stay out of the union, while their ministers joined the union. The people in the south, at East Williams, were better off, because their minister, the Rev. Lachlan Macpherson, refused to enter the union. Mr Macpherson initially held meetings with the people of the north but his former brethren in the ministry, who entered the union, charged him with sowing divisions and so he ceased to go north again until the 1875 union.

The ministers continued to plead with Mr Macpherson to give in and join the union church, and at last after being out for several years, he entered the union under a protest. No sooner had he yielded to their request than his conscience began to upbraid him, so he lost his peace and became a miserable man, as he confessed to a friend afterwards.

The Rev. John Ross of Brucefield took an active part in the negotiations and entered the Union. However, he also found it to be a bitter thing to him. He was led to see the sin and danger of the course into which he, along with the rest of the Free Church, had been running with inexcusable heedlessness².

Union of 1875

In 1875, another union took place between the Canada Presbyterian Church and three other denominations to form the Presbyterian Church of Canada. In that union the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms were cast out. Along with this, there was a resolution binding office-bearers to approve of the “practice presently followed in congregations”, binding men to approve of uninspired hymns and instrumental music in the worship of God. Whereas the Westminster Confession of Faith taught that the “acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will” (WCF 21.1) and that the prescribed manual of praise involved “signing of psalms with grace in the heart” (WCF 21.5), innovations had now thrown out the Scriptural standards.

The Rev. John Ross of Brucefield tabled a protest against the union, and along with Rev. Lachlan Macpherson, George Forrest and Donald Fraser, two of their elders, formed themselves into a Presbytery. They considered it worse than sacrilege, for the sake of union with men, to abandon such fundamental doctrines and principles. They bound themselves and those who might adhere to them anew to the original Constitution of the Free Church of Scotland, which was the whole doctrine of the Confession of Faith.

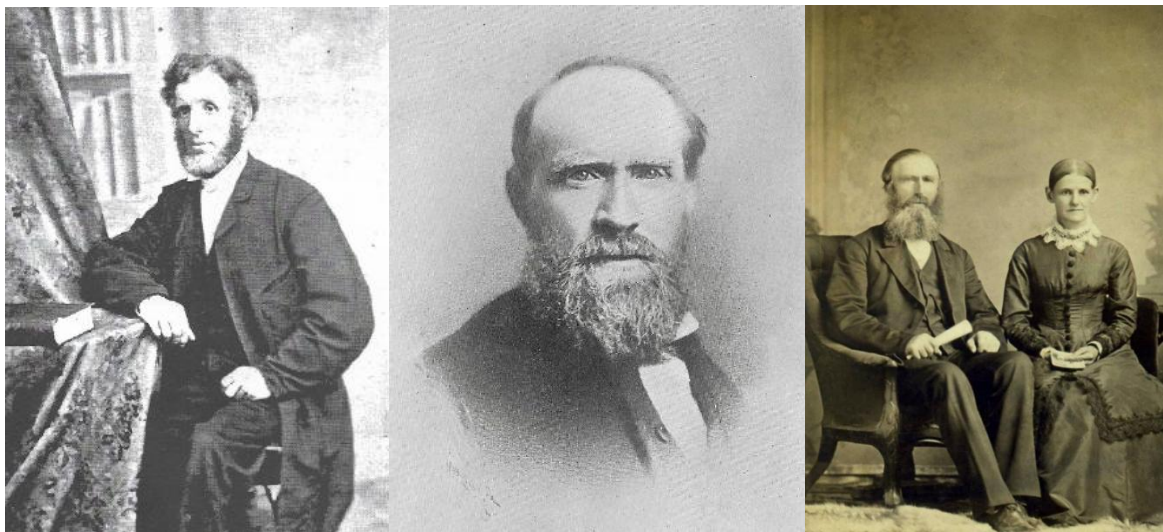
² The Man with the Book, Or Memoirs of John Ross of Brucefield by Anna Ross

The people of Lochalsh and Kincardine hearing of this sent a deputation to Brucefield to ascertain the real position taken up, and, if satisfied, to join with them. Being satisfied with the stand taken, they at once joined them, and besought them to take these congregations under their ministerial care, which they did.

These two godly ministers did their utmost to dispense the ordinances of the gospel among the people until Mr. Macpherson passed away in 1886 and Mr. Ross in 1887.

Around 1898, Daniel Clarke was requested to act as a missionary amongst the various groups in Ontario. He was soon given a place amongst the Lord's people and his was a unifying influence amongst the scattered groups. He lived at first in Brucefield and latterly at Egmondville. He had much anxiety about the 1861 Union, and along with Rev. John Ross, did not enter the 1875 Union. He was born in Tongue, Sutherland, Scotland, on 18th December, 1831 and passed away on 30th May 1918.

For more information see *Pioneer Life in Zorra* by W.A. Mackay and *Memoir of the Rev. John Bayne, D.D., of Gault*.



From left; Rev. Lachlan Macpherson of East Williams; Rev John Ross of Brucefield; Mr. George Forrester and his wife, Isabella.

The Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland in Ontario

Mr George Forrester, an elder of Rev. John Ross of Brucefield, started communications with the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland in the late 1890s. After Mr. Ross passed away most of the Brucefield congregation fell away to the union church but a minority remained faithful. Mr. Forest stated: "I am very thankful that a kind providence led me to cast in my lot with the Free Presbyterian Church, for it is small and despised by some who ought to know better. Yet they have thus far maintained a Scriptural form of worship

when larger churches are corrupting it with men's inventions". He was born in New Deer, Aberdeenshire, Scotland and passed away on December 21, 1912, in his ninetieth year.

At the November 1901 meeting of Synod of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, a petition came before it, signed by forty-nine individuals, including Mr. Forrest and Mr. Clarke, representing those in several districts in the Province of Ontario requesting that the Synod (1) receive them as part their mission field and (2) send a minister out to dispense the ordinances of the gospel among them. The petition was granted.

Rev. Neil Cameron was appointed by the Synod to visit Ontario in August 1902, spending eight Sabbaths among them, accompanied by an Elder, Mr Allan McLachlan.

Rev. Neil Cameron at the Synod of November 1902 reported, "It may be dutiful here to notice the hardships to which all the unions known to us, whether in Scotland or Canada, have put those who value God's truth above human amalgamations at the expense of losing the great doctrines and principles of the Word of God. This was really the case in Canada. Our people there are not schismatic, neither do they undervalue a gospel ministry; but they loved the crown rights of the Lord Jesus, the doctrines of grace, and the spiritual worship of His true Church too dearly to abandon them at the caprice of graceless men"

"In every place visited by us we were received with open arms. It is impossible to over-estimate their kindness to us, and though we were willing to get back to our beloved friends in Scotland, when our duties were accomplished, we must confess that parting with our dear people there was like cutting off a hand or a foot.....they are a part of our church, they are our brethren and sisters in the flesh, and a goodly number of them are beloved in the Lord"

Mr Beaton in his memoir of Mr. Cameron wrote - "Mr Cameron ever retained the warmest feelings to those he met out there - including some of the excellent of the earth, who are now, like himself, at their everlasting rest: This was the beginning of a series of visits from deputies from the Church, but, and we say it without disparagement of others, none made so great an impression as the first deputy, and we know for a fact that not a few heard the truth for their eternal salvation while the Lord's people were greatly revived."

Ministerial supply was provided regularly to Ontario after this date.

For more information, see Synod Report of Visit to Ontario by Rev. Neil Cameron, Vol 7, F.P. Magazine; Obituary of Mr. George Forrest Vol 17, F.P. Magazine; and Obituary of Mr. Daniel Clarke, Vol 23, F.P. Magazine.

Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland Witness in Chesley

In April 1912 the Rev. Walter Scott came to Ontario as a deputy to the Canadian Missions, spending three Sabbaths in Chesley. In September 1912 Mr. Scott accepted a call to Chesley, along with the oversight of the other places of the Ontario Mission: Lochalsh, Egmont Ville, East Williams, West Williams, Lobo, North Line Kincardine, town of Kincardine, Brucefield and Newton. He passed away in January 1916.

In August 1917 Mr. William Matheson, probationer of Lochalsh, Ontario, was ordained missionary to the Free Presbyterian Church mission in Canada. Mr. Matheson was settled as the minister of the Chesley Congregation and the other parts of the Ontario Mission. In 1929, Mr. Matheson opposed the courts of the Free Presbyterian Church by stating that travelling by trains or other public transport on the Sabbath to church was not sinful. Mr. Matheson and his Kirk Session consequently left the Free Presbyterian Church. The church gave until August 1930 for the adherents of the Ontario Mission to fall in with the church's position. No reply was received from any of the adherents by that date and so they put themselves out of the Free Presbyterian Church. However it became apparent that a number of the adherents were unaware of what had taken place and in 1931 communications were received from groups in East Williams, and Chesley stating that they still adhered to the FP Church, but the church did not reinstate them. Mr. Matheson and the congregation called themselves the Free Presbyterian Church of Ontario and continued minister of that church until his decease in 1957. Thus, Mr. Matheson was responsible for ending the Free Presbyterian witness in Ontario at that time.

Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland Witness Returns to Chesley

In November 1965, a congregation in Toronto called the Bloor East Presbyterian Church along with the Free Presbyterian Church of Ontario in Chesley, formed a union calling themselves the Presbyterian Reformed Church. Professor John Murray of Westminster Seminary prepared a Basis of Union which was ratified by both congregations in November 1965.

In the summer of 1974, two of the four elders, Mr. Gerrit Schuit and Mr. Robert Elliot, of the Chesley Presbyterian Reformed Church, along with the majority of the Toronto Presbyterian Reformed Church elders desired to join the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Both congregations were without a

minister. At a presbytery meeting of the Presbyterian Reformed Church, held in Toronto, a proposal by Rev. Donald Campbell, Edinburgh, and Convenor of the Overseas Committee of the FP Church to receive the two congregations into the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland was rejected. Mr Robert Elliot, who belonged to the original Free Presbyterian congregation in Ontario, could not attend due to illness, and he passed away at the end of the summer of 1974.

Mr. Gerrit Schuit, who had emigrated from The Netherlands to Ontario after the Second World War and joined the Presbyterian Reformed Church in the early 1960s, separated from that church along with about half the congregation in Chesley, including many who were his relatives from The Netherlands, and sought to join the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. He held services of worship on the Sabbath and a weekly prayer meeting. The Toronto congregation also sought to join the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. A Free Presbyterian deputy, Rev. John A. MacDonald, Fort William, was sent out in the fall of 1974 to both congregations for eight weeks, in order to appraise them. At a *pro re nata* Synod of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, held in December 1974, both the Toronto and Chesley congregations were received into the church.

Scotland sent out deputies in those early years, usually for a period of six weeks. In 1975, the congregation was able to purchase a church building. During a communion season in 1976 at which Rev. Donald Maclean officiated, I remember the elderly Mrs. Edwards of the Lochalsh congregation, who had re-joined the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland commenting after a service, "My father always prayed for the return of the Free Presbyterian Witness and I live to see it." Another communicant member in our congregation was Mrs. M Mackenzie who passed away in 1977. Mrs Edwards passed away in 1981.

Most of the Toronto congregation joined the Associated Presbyterian Churches in the secession of 1989 and is no longer in existence. Mr. Henry Scrambler, elder, who emigrated from Glasgow, Scotland in 1972 to Oakville, with his wife to support their widowed daughter remained faithful to the witness of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. He passed away on November 8, 1991 while attending a Communion season in Chesley, with Rev. D.B. Macleod officiating. On his death bed while the minister and friends were gathered he raised his finger and pointed it at Gerrit Schuit and exclaimed "Gerrit! As cold waters to a thirsty soul so is good news from a far country" Prov.25.25. He was not strong enough to finish the quote but Mr. Schuit finished it for him.

Mr. Neil Macpherson, elder, from Glendale, Skye, Scotland moved to Chesley in 1982 and stayed for nine years before returning to Scotland. He had a real sense of the depravity of man, which came out in his public prayers.

Mr. Gerrit Schuit, who was responsible for the return of the Free Presbyterian Witness in Chesley, and who was steadfast to the testimony of the church, and never wavered from it in trying times, passed away in December 11, 2006. He had come to know the Lord when only nine years old. It was the name Jesus that became very precious to him. He was a godly man and much given to prayer. He longed for and prayed for the coming of Christ's Kingdom in the world, and grieved over whatever was injurious to the Lord's cause and kingdom. His passing away left a blank in the congregation where he served as an elder for thirty-two years, and faithfully discharged his duty to the end.



From left; Rev. Walter Scott; Mr. Gerrit Schuit; Revs. Donald B. Macleod, Alfred Macdonald, Donald Maclean, Donald Nicholson, John A. Macdonald, and Angus F. Mackay at a meeting of Synod, all of whom made visits to Chesley.