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THE SESQUICENTENNIAL OF THE FIRST SYNOD OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

THE ESTABLISHMENT of the first Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Nova Scotia on July 3, 1817, was an attempt to meet more effectively the religious challenge of the times. The current supply of ministers was not equal to the immediate demand. Immigration was increasing. The connection with the Secession Churches was the main source of life and strength for Presbyterianism in the Province, but reluctance to leave Scotland made the prospect of a supply of missionaries from that quarter very dim, and the perpetuation in Nova Scotia of divisions then existing in Scotland had for decades delayed a systematic and co-ordinated prosecution of missionary labour. Hence the formation of a Synod in 1817, bringing what had been the Burgher Presbytery of Truro and the Antiburgher Presbytery of Pictou into one body, called the Presbyterian Church of Nova Scotia, was a significant step not only in mobilizing the available forces in harmonious action, but also in harnessing those resources for the training of a native ministry.

Nova Scotia had made considerable progress since the days of John Cabot's landfall in 1497. The colonial enterprises of DeMonts and Sir William Alexander (afterwards Earl of Stirling) were now far in the past. Anglo-French rivalry for a century and a half had left Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island in British control. The country became British in fact as well as in name with the founding of Halifax in 1749 and of other townships in the 1750s and 1760s. Population had increased with the return of Acadians, the coming of Yorkshiremen, the inflow of Loyalists, and the arrival of Scots, Irish, and English. There had been Scots at Halifax from the time of its founding. The *Hector* brought 200 Scots to Pictou in 1773. Direct immigration from Scotland to Cape Breton Island resumed in 1802. Between 1790 and 1815, about 3,500-5,500 Scots came into Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island, and following the Napoleonic Wars immigration increased. By 1817, when there

were 8,937 persons in the District of Pictou, the population of peninsular Nova Scotia was 86,668, with probably 6,000 or 7,000 additional persons in Cape Breton, making a total of about 93,000 or 94,000 people in both. At that time there were at least 21 Presbyterian ministers in Nova Scotia, Cape Breton Island, and Prince Edward Island, but there were vacancies at Economy, Cumberland, Ramsheg (Wallace), St. Mary's, Manchester, Gut of Canso, Belfast, Tryon, and Rawdon.

In Scotland, at that time, the Secession Church was divided into two branches, both of which had missions in Nova Scotia. The Secession Church itself had arisen from the circumstances caused by an Act of Assembly of the Church of Scotland which had abolished the last remnant of popular election of ministers in 1732. Subsequently, in 1747, a violent controversy respecting the religious clause of the oath taken by burgesses in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Perth ("I profess and allow with my heart the true religion presently professed within this realm and authorized by the laws thereof") resulted in the Secession Church being divided into Burghers and Antiburghers. Those who contended that abstinence from the burghess oath should not be made a term of communion were designated Burghers, while those who condemned the swearing of the burghess oath as sinful became popularly known as Antiburghers. Each section of the Secession Church had its Associate Synod, and both Synods were interested in missions in Nova Scotia.

Whether Presbyterians in Nova Scotia be regarded as of American or of Scottish origin, the Presbyterian Church in Canada began its history in Nova Scotia. It may be traced back to a Huguenot minister in the DeMonts expedition to Acadia in 1604 and to the Scottish minister sent out by Sir William Alexander to Nova Scotia in 1622. It is also interesting to recall that a service conducted at Louisbourg in 1758 by the Presbyterian Chaplain to Colonel Fraser's Highland Regiment was the first Presbyterian service ever held in Canada in the English language.

Continuing missionary endeavour was begun by Presbyterian ministers in Nova Scotia in the 1760s. After the settlement of the townships of Truro, Onslow, and Londonderry, in 1761-62, the Scotch-Irish from New Hampshire and the North of Ireland, who went to that district, appealed to the Presbytery of New Brunswick, New Jersey, for a minister, and the Synod of New York and Philadelphia responded by appointing the Reverend James Lyon, who came to Nova Scotia early in 1765 and became the first resident Presbyterian minister in Canada. In 1765, Mr. Lyon not only preached in Halifax, but he was one of the members of the Philadelphia Company which received a grant of

Pictou. He served in the Cobequid district and in Pictou, but by 1771 he was in Boston and in 1772 he settled in Machias, Maine.

It was soon evident that Scotland was to be the main source of life and strength of the early Presbyterian Church in Nova Scotia. Even before the petition had been addressed to the Presbytery of New Brunswick, New Jersey, the inhabitants of Truro and vicinity had sent two applications to the Secession Church in Scotland. One of those petitions was referred by the Associate Presbytery of Glasgow to the Synod which met in Edinburgh in May, 1765. The Associate Synod appointed the Reverend David Telfar and Mr. Samuel Kinloch, probationer, to go on a mission to America, and the attention of James Murdoch, then at the University of Edinburgh preparing for the ministry, was also turned toward Nova Scotia. Mr. Kinloch went out to Nova Scotia in the spring of 1766 and proceeded to Truro.

Shortly afterwards a committee at Truro directed a letter to Scotland expressing the hope that Mr. Kinloch would be appointed for their constant supply until they could have a call moderated for him, while at the same time the inhabitants of Londonderry petitioned for a minister. By that time James Murdoch had been ordained by the Presbytery of Newtonlimavady in September, 1766, and commissioned to go to America. Mr. Murdoch reached Nova Scotia late in 1766 or early in 1767. After preaching for some time in Halifax, he served at Horton and Musquodoboit, and visited other settlements, until his death in 1799.

Although Mr. Kinloch declined the call from Truro and returned to Scotland early in 1769, the Synod in Scotland, at its meeting in August, 1767, appointed the Reverend Daniel Cock to set out for America in about six weeks or two months. This appointment was not immediately accepted, but it was renewed at the meeting of Synod in August, 1769, when it was agreed that the Reverend David Smith of St. Andrews would accompany him. In 1770, not only did Mr. Cock arrive in Truro, but Bruin Romkes Comingo was ordained to the office of the Holy Ministry over "the Dutch Calvinistic Presbyterian Congregation of Lunenburg", at a meeting of a special Presbytery constituted by Reverend James Murdoch and Reverend James Lyon, two Presbyterians, and Reverend Benajah Phelps and Reverend John Seccombe, two Congregationalists, at Halifax.

After the Presbyterians of Truro presented a call to him in September, 1770, Mr. Cock returned to Scotland for his family and also for the purpose of being regularly separated from his congregation there. In 1771 Reverend David Smith arrived and Reverend Daniel Cock returned, with Mr. Smith

entering upon his permanent charge at Londonderry before Mr. Cock was permanently established at Truro. Messrs. Cock and Smith not only looked after their own congregations, but they made occasional visits to the people of Tatamagouche, Pictou, Shubenacadie, Cornwallis, and other places. The needs were not only great but growing, and the labourers were few.

Two communities which also appealed to Scotland for ministers were Cornwallis and Pictou. One result of these petitions was the appointment of Reverend Hugh Graham of Scotland to Cornwallis in 1785. This was the year when the Loyalist clergyman, Reverend George Gillmore, a native of Ireland who had been educated in Scotland, assumed charge of the Presbyterian congregation at Windsor, N. S. Meantime, a petition from Pictou, which had been founded in 1767 and strengthened by the Scottish immigrants in the *Hector* in 1773, was presented to the General Associate or Burgher Synod in Scotland in May, 1786, and Reverend James MacGregor was appointed to Pictou. Although at first thunderstruck by this decision of the Synod, Mr. MacGregor resolved to go to Nova Scotia. On June 3, 1786, he sailed in the brig *Lily* for Halifax. Landing there on July 11, he then proceeded on horseback, with a farmer from Truro as a companion, to Truro, where he paid his respects to Mr. Cock, before going to Londonderry to do likewise to Mr. Smith, and then he rode on to Pictou to become the first resident minister in that district.

The hardships endured by these early ministers were immense. They travelled great distances on foot, on snow-shoes, and on horseback. In October, 1793, Mr. Graham, on his way back to Cornwallis, set out on a hot day for a place where he expected to go on board a vessel for the remainder of the journey. Disappointed in that expectation, he and his companion, now encountering heavy rain, took to the woods on foot and after walking five miles took shelter for the night in a mud hut, wet as they were. Next morning they set out at daybreak and after walking all day arrived at a friendly house after dark, having travelled about forty miles since morning. From there Mr. Graham rode horseback four or five miles farther to the house of another friend and there he spent the night. The following morning he was on his way on horseback before sunrise. It was Sunday and he still had twenty-five miles to go to hold a service in his own church at noon. Changing horses on the way, he arrived in time and preached a sermon. On one occasion, Reverend James Monro, in the course of his peregrinations, lost his way while travelling on foot from Pictou, and was compelled to spend two nights in the branches of a tree, into which he had climbed through fear of bears, having bound

himself by a rope to prevent his falling down in his sleep. Reverend James MacGregor and others experienced similar trials, and frequently their congregations had difficulty in paying their stipends. Mr. MacGregor used to speak regularly in English and in Gaelic in two places in alternate weeks, preaching two sermons every Sunday. Some persons who were backward in supporting the gospel insisted that they who understood both languages should pay a double share of the stipend.

The first regular Presbytery in Nova Scotia was established in 1786. At the time when the Associate Synod in Scotland appointed Reverend Hugh Graham to Cornwallis in 1785, it also made provision to advise and authorize Reverend Messrs. Daniel Cock and David Smith to constitute themselves into a Presbytery, along with Reverend Hugh Graham. Subsequently, when Reverend James MacGregor was passing through Truro on his way to Pictou for the first time in 1786, Mr. Cock was disappointed at his not being disposed to become a member of the proposed Presbytery, the more so perhaps because he had drafted the Pictou petition which had resulted in the appointment of Mr. MacGregor to that place. However, on June 26, 1786, Messrs. Cock, Smith, and Graham, and most of the elders of the congregation of Truro, met at the house of Mr. Cock in Truro to consider the expediency of constituting a Presbytery. They agreed to meet again in Truro for that purpose. Accordingly, on August 2, 1786, the Presbytery of Truro was established by Reverend Messrs. Cock, Smith, and Graham, and John Johnston from the session of Truro and John Barnhill from the session of Londonderry, and with Reverend George Gillmore, who became a corresponding member, and Reverend James MacGregor also in attendance. Mr. MacGregor did not regard himself as a member of this Presbytery and he soon discontinued attending its meetings. Six years later, however, the Presbytery of Truro obtained another clergyman with the accession of Reverend James Monro, who was an itinerating missionary until he settled in Antigonish. Upon his arrival in 1797, Reverend John Waddell of Truro joined the Presbytery of Truro, as did Reverend Matthew Dripps, who after itinerating for a time took charge of the congregation at Shelburne. The Burgher Synod of Scotland had appointed most of the Presbyterian ministers then stationed in Nova Scotia, and the ministers of the Presbytery of Truro were in association with it, whereas Reverend James MacGregor had been appointed to Pictou by the Antiburgher Synod. Time and a better acquaintance with conditions in the New World were needed to bring about closer co-operation between Burgher and Antiburgher clergymen in Nova Scotia.

After labouring alone for nine years, Reverend Mr. MacGregor was greatly pleased by the arrival of two colleagues—Reverend Duncan Ross and Reverend John Brown—in 1795. Mr. Ross was soon settled at West River and Mr. Brown was stationed at Londonderry, where Mr. Smith had just died. Now there were three Antiburgher ministers in the Province, and on July 7, 1795, Reverend Messrs. MacGregor, Ross, and Brown constituted themselves into a Presbytery, called the Associate Presbytery of Nova Scotia, or more commonly, the Associate Presbytery of Pictou.

During the next twenty-two years the Burgher Presbytery of Truro and the Antiburgher Presbytery of Pictou, offshoots of the two branches of the Secession Church in Scotland, were strengthened by the arrival of additional ministers. Reverend Messrs. Alexander Dick, Thomas McCulloch, John Mitchell, and William Patrick joined the Presbytery of Pictou, while Reverend Messrs. John Laidlaw, Robert Douglas, William Forsyth, and James Robson became members of the Presbytery of Truro. Notwithstanding the increase in the number of ministers, however, the needs were growing at a faster rate.

A greater appreciation of common problems, a feeling that it was undesirable to perpetuate divisions in the Presbyterian Church, and a tentative, small, yet growing measure of goodwill and accord—all these ripened into a desire to heal the division. At his first arrival, Mr. MacGregor was not yet ready for a formal arrangement. A meeting between ministers of the two Presbyteries in 1795 or 1796 failed to achieve that sort of result. The matter was later brought before the session by members of the Truro congregation, and in 1815 the Presbytery of Pictou was requested to meet with the Presbytery of Truro. By September 18, 1816, the Presbytery of Truro had received a letter from the Presbytery of Pictou proposing a common or general union. A month later practical co-operation was put into effect when arrangements were made for Mr. Waddell and Mr. MacGregor jointly to supply St. Mary's. By February, 1817, Reverend Messrs. Duncan Ross and Thomas McCulloch had sat with members of the Presbytery of Truro at Halifax, both Presbyteries had given careful consideration to the matter, and a decision had been made to hold a meeting at Truro on July 3, 1817, for the purpose of consummating a union of the two Presbyteries. Plans had now been made, and Articles of Confederation had been drafted.

Accordingly, on July 3, 1817, a notable company of clergymen and ruling elders assembled at Truro and instituted the first Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Nova Scotia. Those present included such clergymen as Reverend James MacGregor, of Pictou, whose apostolic zeal and missionary

labours are still held in grateful remembrance; Reverend Thomas McCulloch, whose outstanding services in the ministry, in education, and in the cause of reform constitute a lasting legacy; Reverend Hugh Graham of Stewiacke, Reverend John Brown of Londonderry, Reverend Duncan Ross of West River, Reverend John Mitchell of River John, Reverend James Robson of Halifax, Reverend Thomas Stewart Crowe of Douglas, Reverend Robert Blackwood of Upper Shubenacadie, and Reverend Robert Douglas of Onslow. The elders in attendance were Robert Gemmel of Stewiacke, John McLean of West River, Alexander Millar of Truro, James Patterson of Pictou, and Caleb Putnam of Douglas. Reverend James MacGregor was chosen moderator, and Reverend James Robson was appointed clerk of synod.

Thus were the Presbytery of Truro and the Presbytery of Pictou united in a Synod in 1817. The union then formed comprehended all the Presbyterian ministers in the Province, excepting Dr. Archibald Gray of St. Matthew's Church, Halifax, and Reverend Bruin Romkes Comingo of Lunenburg. Although, at the time, the congregation of St. Matthew's, Halifax, was not inclined to unite, Dr. Gray himself approved of the movement and continued on friendly terms with the members of the Synod. In the circumstances, the title assumed by the Synod—the Presbyterian Church of Nova Scotia—was not inappropriate.

Within the new Synod, three Presbyteries were now created—the Presbytery of Truro, the Presbytery of Pictou, and the Presbytery of Halifax, comprising congregations extending from the Gut of Canso to Shelburne, from Wallace to Cornwallis, and from Londonderry and Economy to Musquodoboit and Upper Shubenacadie. A committee was appointed to correspond with the Associate Synods in Scotland, and another committee was appointed for devising ways and means for promoting religion. Not only was a more systematic missionary effort now possible, but soon subscriptions were raised for the establishment of congregational libraries, steps were taken toward the printing and dissemination of religious publications, and all congregations were urged to open subscriptions for the Presbyterian Academy which was intended to be established in Pictou. This union, embodied in the first Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Nova Scotia, preceded by three years a similar union in Scotland. The year of 1967, therefore, marked not only the Centennial of Confederation but also the sesquicentennial of the first Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Nova Scotia.