

The Free Church of Scotland Congregation in Aberdeen 1905-2005



This booklet provides a brief introduction to the history of the congregation: it is hoped to publish a full history at a later date. Its contents are based on the efforts of the Session Clerk, Dr I R MacDonald in assembling information from the minute books of the Kirk Session, Deacons' Court and Finance Committee. Most of the drafting was carried out by Dr John Smith. Our debt to Dr MacDonald and Dr Smith in making the possible the production of this booklet is gratefully acknowledged.

Aberdeen 2005

Introduction

The Free Church congregation in Aberdeen marks its centenary in 2005. During its life, it has known times of adversity and times of prosperity but it is thankful that it has been able to maintain a consistent Reformed witness in a city that has undergone dramatic social and cultural change.

The life of any congregation is difficult to characterise comprehensively at any one point in time, and the difficulty is of course compounded over a timescale of several decades. During the last 100 years, a diverse range of ministries was enjoyed, and some lengthy vacancies experienced. The history of the congregation is, of course, not just the histories of successive ministries: church life continued from one to the other. Ministries do, however, offer a convenient framework in which the evolution of the congregation in its modern form can be traced.

Background 1785-1905

The Church of Scotland first held services for Gaelic speakers in Aberdeen in 1785. Many of the Highland immigrants to the city (numbering around 1000 at that time) had come to the city to work in the granite quarries. Their own place of worship was constructed ten years later, in Gaelic Lane, off Belmont Street, where the building still stands, albeit now converted into commercial premises. Over the years, many noted ministers from the Highlands and Islands preached in Gaelic Lane, among them John MacDonald of Ferintosh, 'the Apostle of the North'

At the Disruption in 1843, the minister of the Gaelic Church, along with all the other parish ministers in the city of Aberdeen, adhered to the Free Church. Unlike most of the other congregations in the city, which split, the whole of the Gaelic congregation entered the Free Church. Therefore, the Church of Scotland had no use for the building and eventually the Free Church was able to buy it at auction. At this time, the Sabbath morning services were in Gaelic and the afternoon services in English. In 1882, the congregation left Gaelic Lane, having bought an empty Methodist Church in Dee Street, which they renamed St. Columba Free Church.

The Free Church of Scotland, when she was founded in 1843, was a nationwide denomination which held to the principle of national Establishment of Religion, and was renowned for her commitment to the Reformed faith in doctrine, worship and practice. However, by the close of the 19th century, the Free Church was influenced by liberal theology and Higher Criticism of the Bible. There was a growing movement for the church to join with the United Presbyterian Church. Moreover, by the 1880s, hymns and organs had been introduced into worship in almost all Free Churches outwith the Highlands. St. Columba congregation was one of the few exceptions in the Aberdeen area.

A conservative minority within the Free Church, which drew most of its support from the Highlands and Islands, was implacably opposed to union with the United Presbyterians. With the passing of the older generation of ministers, such as James Begg and John Kennedy of Dingwall, the conservatives lost more ground in the assembly each year. At the 1900 Assembly, the motion in favour of union, forming a new church to be called the United Free Church, was carried by 643 votes to 27. The minority averred that as a result of entering the union and allowing freedom of opinion on doctrines contained in the Westminster Confession, the majority were no longer the true heirs of the Disruption. In the opinion of the minority, those who entered the union had started a new church on different principles from those on which the Free Church was founded. The new United Free Church informed Free Church congregations who refused to enter the union that although no action would be taken "meantime", the buildings they occupied no longer belonged to them. The minority Free Church warned that they would raise a court action to establish their right to the buildings and assets of the Church. The Court of Session in Edinburgh decided in favour of the majority but the minority appealed to the House of Lords. The Law Lords ruled that the minority were entitled to the name, property and assets of the Free Church.

It was evident to both sides that the Free Church would be unable to use most of the buildings and an Executive Commission was appointed by Parliament to apportion the property and money between the two churches. The Commission decided that the Free Church was entitled to the property in congregations where more than one third of the members and adherents, in 1900, were opposed to the Union. In

Aberdeen in 1900, there were 25 Free Church congregations and they all desired to enter the United Free Church. However, the Commission was prepared to allocate buildings to the Free Church in towns where they could gather enough support from various congregations to make one new Free Church congregation. To provide for such people, the Free Church in the meantime began to organise services in halls in major Lowland towns where support for the minority was scattered.

New beginnings in Aberdeen

It was not until 1905 that the Free Church restarted services in Aberdeen; it was hoped that a considerable number of Highland students would support the services. The Interim Moderator was Rev. J. C. Robertson, of Rayne, near Inverurie. Having entered the Union with his congregation, he later changed his mind although his congregation wished to remain in the United Free Church, and so he became involved with the reconstituted Aberdeen congregation. The first Sabbath on which services were held was 5th March 1905 in the Square Room in the Music Hall on Union Street. Initial attendances were encouraging with some 120 present that day and 200 the next Lord's Day. Many of those who attended, however, did so only out of curiosity and by June the attendances had declined to around 50. In 1906, when the Free Church set about assembling information to prove that they were entitled to a church in Aberdeen, they produced a register of 134 names, of whom some 72 had been associated with one or other of the Aberdeen congregations in 1900. The congregation, which continued to meet each week in the Music Hall, elected elders and deacons but most of them remained in office only for a short time. This pattern was to continue for the next few years.

The Free Church formally laid claim to the Free West Church (later Langstane Church of Scotland), on Union Street. The local press claimed that John Knox (now Gerrard Street Baptist) and Bon Accord, Rosemount Viaduct were other possible targets. The Free West, however, was particularly desirable because of its fine architecture, prominent location and ample financial endowments. It was always more probable, however, that, because of its Gaelic and Highland traditions, St Columba Dee Street was the most likely one to be selected by the Commission. Although at the most only 17 members and 18 adherents in St Columba, out a congregation of about 250,

opposed the union, that proportion was still far higher than that of any other congregation in the city.

In May 1907, it was announced by the Executive Commission that the Free Church was to be given the St Columba Church in Dee Street and the manse at 63, Albury Road. To be included were the communion plate, tokens and linen and any moveable furniture within the church. St Columba was the smallest and least impressive of all the 25 United Free church buildings in Aberdeen, with seating for 400 and situated in a side street. It did have the advantage of an adjoining hall, which had been built in 1888, capable of seating 150 and having double cloth-covered doors for sound-proofing. This enabled English and Gaelic services to be held concurrently. The final choice was between Bon Accord, then less than 10 years old, and St Columba. Though the Commission considered that the claims of justice inclined them to give Bon Accord to the Free Church, the historical associations of the building and the "meagre future prospects" of the Free Church cause in the city led them to decide on St. Columba. On 23 June the last United Free service was held, and the keys were handed over.

The opening services of the new Free Church in Aberdeen were held the next weekend and the preacher was Rev. Murdo Mackenzie (Free North, Inverness). It was reported that the church was crowded on that occasion but Mr. MacKenzie was a well-known preacher and the following week the congregation "would scarcely have filled the vestry". From the outset, the congregation suffered from tensions between the more inclusive tendency within the Free Church represented by men like Rev. J.C. Robertson, and the stricter outlook represented by ministers such as Rev. William MacKinnon, Gairloch. After Robertson resigned as Interim Moderator in August

"The attendance was fair, but not what it might have been. The clothes which the girls bring with them to the fishing stations are not those in which they would care to come up through the centre of the city on the Sabbath, and although the attendance at the Hall in Torry leaves nothing to be desired, there is a noticeable falling off when the services are removed to Dee Street."

(Rev. Duncan MacDougall,
Cross Free Church.,
preaching in Aberdeen in
1911.)

1907, his successors were ministers resident in Edinburgh.

For the congregation to be allowed to call a minister, it had to demonstrate its financial viability by reaching the required level of contributions to the Sustentation Fund. Even though St Columba was struggling to do this, a vacancy committee was appointed in October 1908: none of the names it suggested, however, was interested in coming to Aberdeen.

In 1910, a special committee of the General Assembly was appointed to consider the situation in Aberdeen. It recommended that the congregation should be kept going because of the 60 so students from Free Church homes who were resident in the city. Many of the leading ministers of the church had themselves studied in Aberdeen, and were determined to see services continue for this reason. Various ministers in settled charges were sent to Aberdeen as resident supply for a month or two in the hope of attracting better attendances. As well as students, many girls from Lewis followed the herring fleet each year to ports such as Aberdeen, Fraserburgh, Yarmouth and Lowestoft, to gut and salt the fish. Ministers appointed by the Church's Highlands and Islands Committee sometimes took the regular services in Dee Street over the summer months as well as extra Gaelic services, sometimes in a hall in Torry. Soldiers from Highland regiments based in Aberdeen could also provide respectable congregations at times. In 1915, the young Rev. Kenneth A. MacRae, later of Stornoway, preached in Aberdeen as a divinity student. At the 2.30 p.m. Gaelic service, the hall was full of soldiers of the Camerons and Seaforth's. MacRae was concerned that, as he was learning the language at the time, "they could make little of my Gaelic". Donald Murray, a native of Ness, was the most prominent member of the congregation for some years. A champion of Gaelic, he often took the afternoon Gaelic service in the hall.

Rev. Alexander M. Renwick

By 1912, the best that could be said of the congregation was that it had "a prospect of permanency". It was, however, allowed to call a minister under special arrangements. A call was sent to Alexander M. Renwick, Probationer. A native of Kintail, Wester Ross, and a Gaelic speaker, he accepted the call and was inducted on 17 October 1913, being presented with pulpit robes and a study desk and chair. Mr

Renwick was a scholarly and diligent man, who set a high standard of commitment. "His unclouded optimism and boundless zeal cause him always to abound in the work of the Lord". However, the congregation was in poor shape financially, so much so that the minister had to loan money to the Deacons' Court to pay the bills, and when he first arrived in Aberdeen, Mr. Renwick had to live in rented accommodation because the manse had been let.

After 15 months in Aberdeen, he enlisted as an army chaplain to the Black Watch, the First World War having broken out in August 1914. In the spring of 1916 he returned to Aberdeen but shortly thereafter accepted a call to Dumbarton. Problems with office bearers and a lack of money - the annual shortfall in contributions to the Sustentation Fund was deducted from his stipend - may well have influenced his decision. Mr. Renwick later went to Peru as headmaster of the Colegio San Andres, the Free Church school in Lima, before returning to Scotland in 1945 as Professor of Church History in the Free Church College. He was to remain there until 1963. By 1919, the Aberdeen elders had all resigned or died, and assessor elders resident in Edinburgh or Perth were appointed. The infrequent session meetings were held in the Free Church College. No Deacons' Court was held between May 1918 and February 1923, and at this time, the Sabbath School was in abeyance. The General Assembly's insistence that



any minister appointed to Aberdeen should be a Gaelic preacher had limited the choice of ministers and in 1921 it was agreed to drop this stipulation, provided the Gaelic services could be continued in some other way.

Rev. Kenneth C. MacLennan

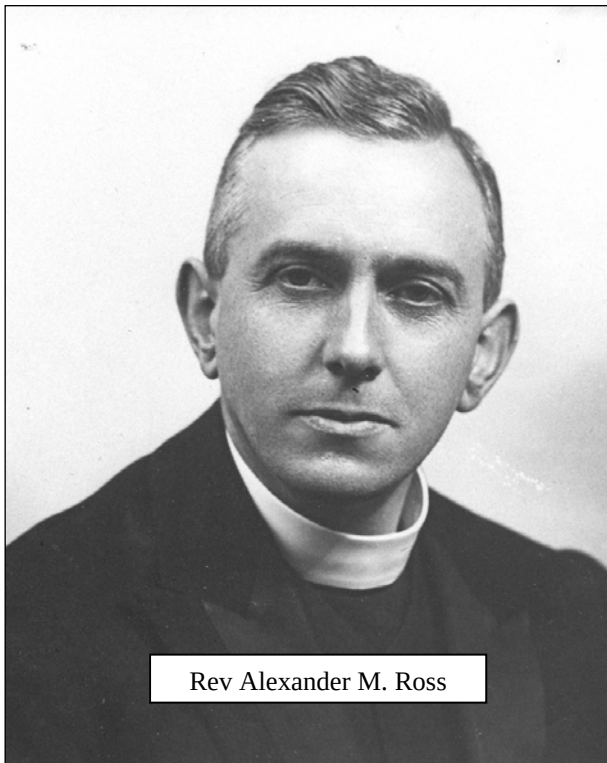
It was obvious that in order to attract another minister, the congregation would require subsidisation from central funds so that the stipend could be raised. In spite of this being agreed, three ministers declined calls from Aberdeen. In 1921 a call was signed to Rev. Kenneth C. MacLennan, but a substantial number – 11 out of 25 members – refused to support him. Though brought up in the Free Church, MacLennan, a native of Knockbain in the Black Isle, had been ordained in Canada and had served as a Presbyterian minister there. Rev. William MacKinnon, Gairloch, in opposing his admission to the ministry of the Free Church, objected to the “sweeping admission of these wandering stars” into the church. In fairness to MacKinnon, in the years after 1900, the Free Church, in an attempt to fill vacancies, had admitted many ministers from other denominations, many of whom had little commitment to Free Church principles and soon left the Church. At any rate, following Mr MacLennan’s induction to Aberdeen, the conservative Gaelic-speaking section of the congregation largely withdrew from fellowship, while still taking an interest in the congregation’s affairs.

A controversy arose over a social gathering for students in the hall at which “certain features of an entirely objectionable character were introduced”. The incident apparently involved the playing of bagpipes or a chanter on that occasion. The disenchanted members were quick to inform Rev. Donald MacLean, Edinburgh who raised the matter at the Presbytery and MacLennan was enjoined “to have solemn regard for the things that are edifying and make for peace and harmony throughout the church”. Mr. MacKinnon in Gairloch wrote to the *Monthly Record*, pointing out that this incident proved that Mr MacLennan was unsuitable as a Free Church minister. To conservatives like MacKinnon, social gatherings within church buildings were associated with the liberalising tendencies in the pre-1900 Church.

By September 1925, Kenneth MacLennan had accepted a call to Ardersier, but he did not remain long there either and within two years, he returned to Canada. With MacLennan's departure from Aberdeen, his opponents returned to Dee Street. An obituary written many years later in Canada suggests that MacLennan was a mild-mannered man who would have shrunk from arguments and discord: "[he] must have had a unique capacity for liking people to have got so near to them and to evoke such love and loyalty. And with it all he was witty, humorous and friendly. There were no rough edges about Kenneth MacLennan."

Rev. Alexander M. Ross

Rev. Alexander M. Ross, Burghead, accepted a call and was inducted on 14 May, 1926. A native of Dingwall, he was an energetic minister who was very aware of the need to encourage people. Within a year of his arrival the membership had risen to 57. He was open to innovations and on the Sunday nearest Christmas 1926, the praise was led by the Grandholm Mill Choir, with a selection of old Scottish psalm tunes. Mr. Ross had considerable gifts as a writer and edited *The Instructor* (the Church's youth magazine) for some time as well as writing commentaries on several of the New Testament Epistles. His sermons were enhanced by memorable



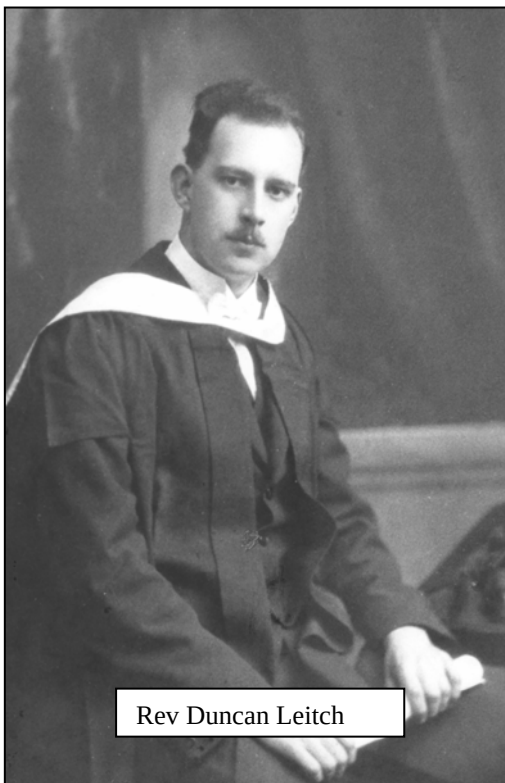
Rev Alexander M. Ross

illustrations and well-chosen poetic quotations. In February 1927, two elders and three deacons were elected. This was the eighth election of office bearers since 1905, but there was not to be another for 30 years. Norman Morrison, a native of Carloway, Isle of Lewis and an employee of Pearl Assurance in Aberdeen, was one of those elected; subsequently, he was to serve as Session Clerk for 40 years.

In April 1928, Mr. Ross accepted a call to Swift Current Presbyterian Church in Saskatoon, Canada. Within a couple of years, he returned to Scotland and to the Free Church in Dumbarton. He later served as Professor of New Testament Exegesis in the Free Church College before concluding his ministry in his first charge, Burghead.

Rev. Duncan Leitch

After two unsuccessful calls, Rev. Duncan Leitch was inducted on 14 June 1929. Mr. Leitch, then 26 years old, was originally from Bannockburn, Stirlingshire and had worked as a draughtsman in a Dumbarton shipyard before studying for the ministry. A tall man, distinguished in appearance, he was always in demand as a conference speaker and his evangelistic preaching was appreciated in a wide constituency beyond his own church. At the induction, Mr. Leitch and his wife were presented with a wallet of notes and a silver teapot and crystal vases. The Rev. Alex. Frazer (a native of Tain and minister of John Knox United Free Church) spoke at his induction and joked "I think



Rev Duncan Leitch

this minister will stick around longer than his predecessors. His name is Leitch!'. This prediction was fulfilled: he was to stay for 11 years.

At the first Communion season of Mr. Leitch's pastorate, Rev. Alexander Stewart of Free St. Columba, Edinburgh, officiated. His eloquent preaching drew large crowds: the ground floor of the church was well filled and the afternoon Gaelic service in the hall, extra chairs had to be brought in. Between 1930 and 1935 the number of communicants on the roll was around 40.

"No doubt Mr. Leitch you have heard of our hardness, like our own grey granite - of the many languages in which we quarrel - of how our ministers, one by one, became strong enough to face the perils of the Andes and the vast prairies. And we want you to become stronger; to be strong enough to stay with us to fight a worthy warfare in our own 'fair city by the sea'."

(Miss Christina MacKay at presentation to Rev. Duncan Leitch at his induction June 1929)

With the exception of Norman Morrison, the Aberdeen elders were old men, and assessor elders from Perth or Dundee often had to be brought in to constitute the session. The issue of electing further office bearers was put off again both during and after Mr. Leitch's ministry. Fortunately, there were younger men willing to shoulder responsibility on the Finance Committee. Simon Hutcheson, a native of Urray, Ross-shire who worked in insurance, acted as precentor for some 40 years until his retiral in 1967 and was also Clerk to the Deacons' Court until 1948. Alex Matheson, originally from Dingwall, had a long and distinguished career in the police force, becoming Chief Constable in 1955. He was Treasurer from 1933 to 1963.

The War Years

In October 1940, Duncan Leitch accepted a call to Kingussie. Later that year, the manse was commandeered for use by the military and in September 1941, to save on the cost of heating, services were transferred to the church hall. In September, 1943, Rev. Alvan D. MacKintosh, an Australian who had completed his course at the Free Church College (and father of Rev. John R. MacKintosh, present minister of Aultbea), was marooned in Britain because of the war. The

Presbytery appointed him interim minister in Aberdeen where he remained until he was able to return to Australia at the end of the war. During the long vacancy between 1940 and 1948, Norman Morrison was the only local elder and the session met only for the purpose of administering the biannual communions. If the assessor from Perth could not travel, the communion went ahead without the session being constituted. The state of the congregation may be inferred from the fact that Rev. Murdo Nicholson, when he was licensed in 1942, was counselled not to consider Aberdeen if he hoped to exercise a worthwhile ministry. During the war, the communion roll stood under 30 but by 1948 had fallen to 17. Sabbath services had attendances of around two dozen: the prayer meeting often only had fewer than ten.

Rev. Hugh G. Mackay

Although the Finance Committee was warned that the congregational remittances to Edinburgh were insufficient to call a minister, permission was given to call Rev. Hugh G. MacKay and he was inducted on 15 January, 1948. Mr. MacKay's father was Rev. John R. MacKay, Free Presbyterian minister in Inverness, who joined the Free Church in 1918 and became Professor of New Testament Exegesis in the Free Church College. Hugh MacKay was ordained and inducted to Kinglassie, Fife, in 1934.

Dr. I. R. Macdonald writes of Mr. Mackay, "A genuine humility concealed a first



Rev Hugh G Mackay

rate mind but he was to be remembered not for the gifts of intellect which he undoubtedly possessed ... but rather for his graciousness, his unaffected friendliness, his evident guilelessness and his consistent cheerfulness". Mr. MacKay was a very youthful-looking and fit man who cycled around Aberdeen and who enjoyed leading students from the church on hill walks. Though rather shy, this did not prevent him faithfully visiting the congregation. Both before and after his marriage in 1960, the Aberdeen manse provided a warm welcome to many students and others. Mr. MacKay had the longest ministry of the century in the Free Church in Aberdeen. This brought stability to the congregation. Mr. MacKay laid a strong emphasis on youth work and did much to encourage the Church's annual Youth Conference when it was first started in the 1950s. Gifted with a melodious voice, he was an expert in psalmody. His neighbours in Ferryhill used to open their windows to hear his rendition of psalm tunes. The Church honoured Mr. MacKay by appointing him Moderator in 1959, the first Moderator of the Free Church from Aberdeen since 1885.

When Mr. MacKay arrived the annual givings were £227; in the last year of his pastorate, 1965, they stood at £1,564. This increase during a period of relatively low inflation reflects not only a growing congregation but an increasing liberality. For the first nine years of Mr. MacKay's ministry, the Session continued to meet only at Communion time, but in the autumn of 1959 an election of office bearers was finally held and three elders, David Mack, Ian R. MacDonald and Alex Wood, were ordained. Alex Wood, born and bred in Torry, was a trawler owner and one-time councillor who had a long association with the congregation. Sadly, he died within weeks of his ordination, at the age of 90.

During Mr. MacKay's ministry, the first major repairs to the church since 1905 were carried out. In 1958-59, the roof was completely re-slatted and in 1964 the interior redecorated. In October of the same year, Hugh Mackay decided to end the practice of limiting the choice of communion preachers to those who could preach an afternoon Gaelic service, and asked the former minister, Rev. Duncan Leitch, then of Dingwall to officiate. However, Gaelic still had a place in Dee Street. A number of Free Church candidates for the ministry then studying in Aberdeen, including Douglas MacMillan, Angus Alex

MacDonald, Roddy MacLeod, Calum MacLean, Murdo Alex MacLeod and Alasdair Montgomery, were granted permission to hold a weekly Gaelic service during term time.

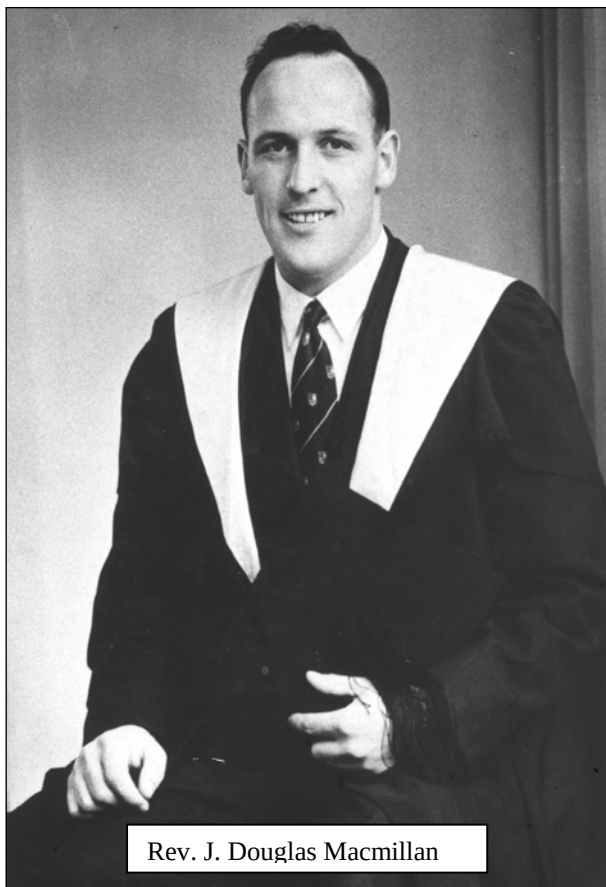
Rev. J. Douglas Macmillan

By 1965 Hugh MacKay felt that Aberdeen would benefit from a younger minister, and he accepted a call to Killearnan. The vacancy which followed his departure was the shortest in the congregation's history. Eleven out of the twelve on the Vacancy Committee favoured

James Douglas MacMillan, a final year divinity student. The call was signed by 115 persons and his induction took place on 3rd September, 1966.

Douglas MacMillan was a native of Ardnamurchan, Argyll and had been a shepherd before studying for the ministry. He was well known to the congregation from his time in Aberdeen University, as was his wife, Mary, a daughter of Rev. Murdo Campbell, Resolis. Mr.

MacMillan was a big man, an energetic visitor and a forceful preacher. By the end of his first year in the city, he had



Rev. J. Douglas Macmillan

contacted 240 adults with Free Church connections. He promoted the

appointment of candidates for the ministry as student missionaries in Aberdeen. A number of men, including Andrew Fraser, Finlay Mackenzie and John Macleod, served in that capacity in the early 1970s. During Mr MacMillan's ministry, the congregation saw unprecedented growth. Often the church was crowded. The blessing seen in these years was reflected in the givings: in 1966, the figure was £2162 but by 1973, Mr. MacMillan's last year in Aberdeen, it had risen to £6760. In 1966, a new manse at 77 Forest Avenue was purchased and in 1972, replacement pitch pine pews and a handsome pulpit were obtained from a redundant church near Turriff. In 1969, Norman Morrison was succeeded as Session Clerk by Ian R. MacDonald.

Douglas MacMillan accepted a call to St. Vincent Street, Glasgow and left Aberdeen in February 1974. He was later Professor of Church History in the Free Church College and briefly minister of Buccleuch and Greyfriars in Edinburgh before his untimely death at the age of 56 in 1993.

In the ensuing vacancy, it was felt that the considerable growth the congregation had witnessed would make Aberdeen an attractive prospect for one of the up-and-coming preachers of the Free Church. The first name proposed by the Vacancy Committee was Rev. Fergus Macdonald, then minister in Cumbernauld. Following his negative response, the congregation then sought Rev. Donald MacLeod, then of Partick Highland, Glasgow, but he also declined a call in March 1975.

Following these disappointments, the Vacancy Committee decided to pause before considering other options; providentially, in the spring of 1975, Rev. R.J. Graham, an Ulster Baptist then studying for a Ph.D. at Aberdeen University, was given occupancy of the manse in exchange for providing pulpit supply every second Lord's Day. His preaching had a wide appeal and many visitors augmented the regular worshippers in the following months. If Mr. Graham had been a Free Church minister, he would probably have been called, but he was not eligible.

Rev. Hector Cameron

On 28 October, 1975, a call signed by 64 members and 84 adherents was sent to Rev. Hector Cameron, Dornoch. Although his translation

was opposed by the Presbytery of Dornoch, the Northern Synod overruled the objection, and notwithstanding a long delay, Mr. Cameron was inducted to Dee Street on 20 August, 1976. During the intervening period, Mr. Graham continued to preach before leaving for Canada, to become Professor of Apologetics at North Western Seminary, Vancouver.

Hector Cameron came from a well known clerical family. His grandfather was Rev. Hector Cameron of Back, the champion of the Free Church cause in Lewis in 1900, and his father was minister at Resolis for 34 years. Mr. Cameron had already served in five different charges before he came to St Columba Dee Street. He is remembered as a homely minister who had a remarkable gift for relating to people of all ages and from all walks of life. His preaching was characterised by a warmth and sincerity that left a deep impression on many. Jacob Nantomah, from Ghana, was ordained to the eldership in October 1978, reflecting the increasingly international flavour of the congregation. In 1980, Mr Cameron was Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church.



Rev. Hector Cameron

Before long, the expanding activities of the congregation were hampered by the inadequacy of the building in Dee Street. Each week, the Sabbath School and crèche had to meet in the nearby YWCA

building. Between 1978 and 1980, an outreach was undertaken in the then rapidly growing suburb of Bridge of Don. There, some 70 children regularly attended Sunday School in a local primary school.

The congregation looked for a suitable redundant church building and considered both Skene Street Congregational Church and St. Nicholas Union Grove Church of Scotland. While neither of these churches was deemed suitable, the congregation heard in 1977 that the Church of Scotland congregation which occupied Bon Accord Church was to be joined with Gilcomston (St. Colm's), Summer Street. The Bon Accord building had been constructed as a Free Church, but the congregation joined first the United Free Church in 1900 and then the Church of Scotland in 1929.



A presentation to Rev Hector Cameron and Mrs Cameron on the occasion of his Moderatorship, 30 April 1980

Anticipating this forthcoming union, the Bon Accord Church of Scotland congregation had been careful to keep their building in good order, in the knowledge that the Summer Street church was in a poor condition. They were confident that the Church of Scotland would decide to retain Bon Accord. To everyone's surprise, however, it was announced that the Summer Street church was to be retained and Bon Accord sold. The Bon Accord Finance Committee, when they heard that the Free Church was interested in their building, was delighted that there was a prospect of the church being retained for worship. The Free Church's offer of £22,000 was accepted. In the event, the Bon Accord congregation somewhat broke the rules by concluding this bargain, as they should have first sought the approval of the Church of Scotland General Trustees. The Trustees, however, were good enough not to annul the agreement.

The decision to buy Bon Accord was taken at a congregational meeting on 16 March, 1977. The Dee Street church was sold and then re-sold. The pews went to the Free Churches at Scourie and Golspie and the pulpit, for some years stored in the basement of Bon Accord, eventually found a home in the new Free Church in North Kessock.

The Bon Accord church was officially reopened on Saturday 1st October, 1977. The preacher on that occasion was Rev. Hugh G. MacKay, the former minister. At the closing service in Dee Street the previous Sabbath, Mr. Cameron had taken as his text Titus 2: 11-14, "The grace of God which bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men". It was agreed that the original name of the church should be retained and St Columba Free Church passed into history.

The initial concern that the 700-seat church would prove too large for the size of the congregation, was allayed in the coming years when some 60 names, many of whom had come to the city in connection with the oil industry, were added to the communion roll. During Hector Cameron's ministry, the givings rose from £10,000 in 1976 to £29,000 in 1982.

Mr. Cameron received a call from Killearnan, in the Black Isle, and was inducted there in 1982.

Rev. Alex J. MacDonald

Many of the early members of the Gaelic Chapel originated from east Sutherland, and the link was maintained in the next ministry. Rev. Alex J. MacDonald was from the Strath of Kildonan. He was inducted to Bon Accord on 22nd October, 1983. The congregation had been single-minded in their desire to call him as their next minister. Having served as minister of Bishopbriggs since his ordination in 1973, Mr. MacDonald came to Aberdeen with a reputation as an original thinker. In his preaching, he frequently applies the teaching of the Bible to current issues. During his time in Aberdeen he wrote a book on this subject entitled *Love Minus Zero*, as well as *Creation in crisis? Green concerns and Christianity*, published in 1992. He was greatly in demand as a conference speaker, particularly among student groups.



Rev. Alex J. MacDonald

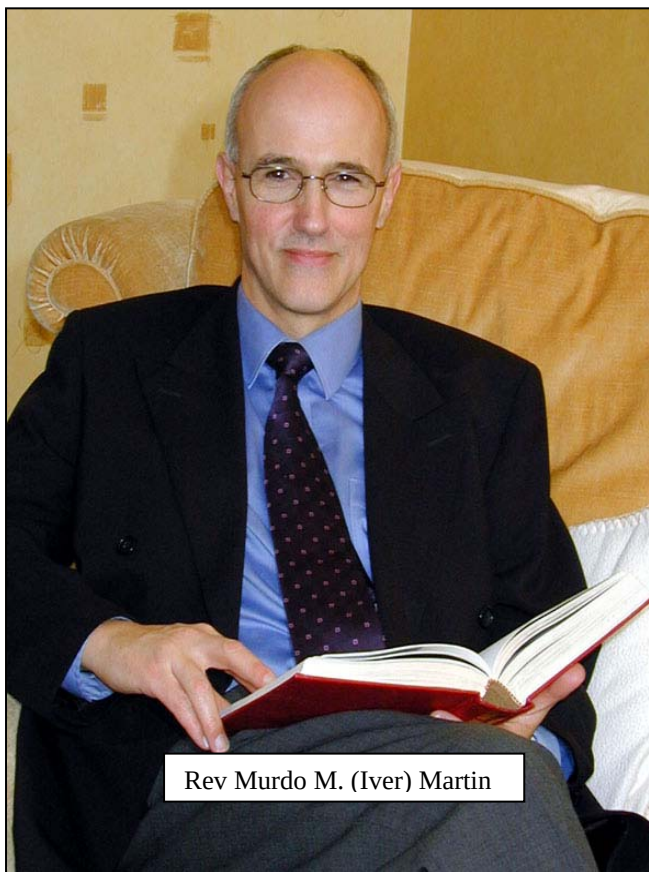
The Kirk Session was greatly strengthened during Mr. MacDonald's ministry, with the number of elders reaching double figures. The activities of the congregation were expanded considerably. Features of the period included an increasing number of children associated with the congregation, and increasing provision for them. Boys' and girls' clubs for primary-school children and a youth club for those of secondary age were successful both in providing enjoyment and in presenting the Gospel to many children from the neighbourhood as well as from church families. Alex MacDonald

was translated to Free Buccleuch and Greyfriars, Edinburgh on 29 May, 1993. He is at present the editor of the *Monthly Record* and is Moderator Designate of the 2005 General Assembly. In his latter years in Aberdeen, attendance reached record levels, with 300 or more at the morning service.

Rev. Murdo M. (Iver) Martin

During the early stages of the ensuing vacancy, such attendances were maintained, but the vacancy coincided with a time of considerable difficulty within the denomination as a whole.

Sadly, this resulted in the loss of a number of friends who had contributed much to the congregation. Rev. Professor Donald MacLeod, who had acted for some time as Interim Moderator, finally declined a call in October 1996. In the following spring, a call was addressed to Rev. Iver Martin and he was inducted on 13th June, 1997. He was born at Grantown-on-Spey; at the time, his father, Rev. Murdo Martin, was minister of Duthil and Moy. Iver Martin was no stranger to Aberdeen; he gained a B.Sc. in Electronic



Engineering from Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology in 1980. After a successful career in the micro-electronics industry, he entered the Free Church College and was ordained and inducted as assistant minister of Stornoway in 1995.

Mr. Martin soon settled into the Aberdeen scene and brought a period of consolidation and stability to the congregation. An energetic man with an outgoing disposition, Iver Martin's preaching had, like that of his predecessors, an urgent evangelistic note which revealed a heart with a yearning to see souls come to the Saviour. He has a particular ability in working with the young, which was invaluable in the congregation which at this time had a rapidly growing number of young families.

The work among the young was further strengthened when John Johnstone was appointed as full time youth assistant in October 1999, with funding from a private benefactor. With a specific focus on the 50 or so students and the dozen teenagers associated with the congregation, his work over the last few years has been pastoral and evangelistic including both behind-the-scenes work and fellowship meetings and hospitality. In May 2003, the General Assembly provided funding for the post for a further three years. The *Christianity Explored* course has also been used to provide an informal introduction to the faith for those who are not in the habit of attending church services.

The congregation were greatly saddened when they heard that Mr. Martin had been led to accept a call to Stornoway, where he was inducted on 7th November, 2003. In the vacancy, which is ongoing at time of writing, the preaching of the Word from week to week has continued to be a blessing to many. In 2004, the congregation started a Campaigners group, providing structured activities with a Gospel emphasis and building on the work of the previous long standing boys' and girls' clubs.

St Columba and Bon Accord: one hundred years

It is with a profound sense of gratitude to the Lord, the Great King and Head of the Church, that we look back over the past hundred years of congregational life and witness. While there have been some times of discouragement, there clearly has been growth, both in terms of numbers and adherents and in financial resources. This growth has not been

steady or continuous – for example attendances have not yet returned to the mid-1990 levels – but it has, nevertheless, been real.

The present congregation owes much to its predecessors in the first half of the 20th century for their endurance and persistence in the face of adversity. For a large part of the last hundred years, the permanent residents in Aberdeen and the students who were present for only part of the year formed distinct groups. In recent years, such a pattern has been much less evident. While the congregation continues to be enriched by a sizeable student contingent, it also benefits from a substantial core of families settled in and around the city. The demographic character of the congregation is unusually healthy: in recent weeks some 50 young people have been in the church building – in crèche, Sunday School or Bible Class – on Sunday mornings. A major responsibility and challenge for the congregation is to retain these young folks to adulthood.

There is little doubt that the congregation benefited from the economic fortunes of the city during the last quarter of the 20th century. Employment opportunities in oil-related industries have drawn many people to the city, including people with Free-Church backgrounds. The significance of this is reflected in the compositions of the Kirk Session and Deacons' Court, where more than half of the employed members work in oil-related activities. The city's material prosperity has also benefited the congregation, and through congregation remittances to central funds, has benefited the church at large. It has also permitted extensive improvements of the church building to be undertaken. In 1999, for example, new double-glazed windows were installed and the building was completely rewired.

Throughout its history, the congregation has been host to students from Free-Church backgrounds, many of whom have gone on to have influential roles in the church. The diversity of the congregation, in terms of its backgrounds and geographical origins, presents both a challenge and an opportunity. So also does the location of the church, in a residential area on the edge of the central business district. Strategically located to welcome both local residents and visitors to the city, it has to be recognised that the influence of the church on its immediate neighbourhood has as yet been limited. Herein lies a challenge. Another challenge arises from the residential distribution of the congregation. Whereas a hundred years most members resided close to the church, now many live in the suburbs or beyond. As the congregation is 'gathered' rather than based in the local

neighbourhood, participation in some activities, and especially those in mid-week, can be difficult.

There are therefore no grounds for complacency. We are thankful for God's goodness as reflected in congregational life over the last one hundred years, but we are also conscious of an imperative to look outward and forward rather than backward and inward. The maintenance of a Free Church witness in the city is important, but what is most important is the maintenance of a Gospel witness. As we look to the future, we pray that with God's help, we may as a congregation not only survive, but that we may help to light up the city with the good news of Jesus Christ.

"Thus far has the LORD helped us"
I Samuel 7: 12

Further Reading

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