

## Historical Moment #1 The years leading up to and including union

This is the first in a series of historical moments that members of the Centennial Committee will be presenting between now and our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary on June 24, 2017. I'd like to begin by providing some context for the community that our church was founded in.

In the late 1800's Okotoks formed a stopping point along the Macleod trail. Settlers and traders would bring goods up from Fort Benton in Montana, over the border to Fort Whoop Up and on to Fort Calgary. The small town of Okotoks grew up along what was then called the Sheep Creek (now Sheep River) and First Nations land.

There were several congregations here but our focus is on the Methodists and the Presbyterians.

The Methodists placed their first minister here in 1894 with a charge that included High River due to the sparse population. The Methodists began construction on their first church building in 1906. We are told that the morning after Halloween pranksters had placed empty beer kegs in the corners of the foundation. The new Methodist church was dedicated on Easter Sunday Mar. 31, 1907.

The first Presbyterian minister in this community was in 1883 in the person of Rev. Angus Robertson who would deliver a sermon at the RCMP barracks in Calgary then he would ride south preaching at points including: Pine Creek, Okotoks, Davisburg and finally High River. He was known as the "Cowboy Preacher" partly because he wore chaps and a Stetson hat but also because he rode the range country and was known to deliver short sermons in the evening around the campfire of cow camps.

Dr. J.S. McIvor was the Presbyterian minister in 1907, and his incumbency seems to be noted chiefly as the time the Ladies went out on strike. One of the recurring problems of his time was the hiring of the organist. The Session hired, and the Ladies Aid without any bargaining rights, was expected to pay. When the fee came too high the Aid simply fired the organist, and hired a cheaper one, of whom the Session did not approve. Some of the Session advised caution, but a letter was sent to the Aid. The Session intended it as an invitation to attend a meeting, and discuss the matter calmly. Instead the Ladies read it as a demand to appear to be publicly reprimanded and to apologize to the Minister. A meeting was called, resolutions not to attend the special meeting and not to apologize were unanimously carried, and one to withdraw financial support and to disband were also carried. A letter was sent to the Session, and the Aid held no meeting for several months when one was called to approve a grant of \$100 to pay the new minister, and arrange a welcome to Rev. C.B. Kerr (see back of bulletin).

Rev. Kerr (1913 -1918) was ordained in the ministry in 1911. He came to Okotoks as the Presbyterian minister in 1913 with his wife Patricia and their 5 children. He was described as a

## Historical Moment #1 The years leading up to and including union

soft-spoken Irishman and a diplomat who seems to have smoothed over the internal strife with the ladies.

We're not told exactly why the Presbyterians and Methodists began to consider union however several factors may have led to the first discussions including: the influences of WWI and the bond it created between people, the Presbyterians were outgrowing their building while the Methodists were still trying to pay for theirs and a growing appreciation that there was very little difference in their beliefs. Furthermore, unions were being tried elsewhere in the west and Rev. Kerr was a supporter of this movement.

On Feb. 18, 1917 a motion was put forward by St. Luke's to "get an expression of the mind of the congregation in regard to the proposed union with the Methodist congregation of this place". Subsequent discussions were held, votes were taken and union was eventually approved.

So it was the St. Luke's Presbyterian's and the Methodist churches joined to become the United Church of Okotoks in affiliation with the Presbyterian Church in Canada on June 24, 1917- 8 years before the greater union that became the United Church of Canada. It was the unanimous wish of both congregations that Rev. Kerr retain the pastorate which he did. The Presbyterian Manse at 102 McRae Street was retained as the minister's residence and the Methodist church became home to our congregation until 2002.

Rev. Kerr led the congregation through many "firsts": the appointment of the first session or board, the inauguration of the first Ladies Aid in August 1917, the first church picnic and our first children's Christmas program and AGM. He resigned after 1 year.

I read to you from the Okotoks Review dated July 5, 1918.

*"Rev. Kerr's resignation came as a surprise to the board however he explained that he was acting in accordance with his belief that a man's best efforts are handicapped by remaining longer than about five years in one field and he was not prepared to reconsider his decision. It is about five years since Mr. Kerr came to St. Luke's church and when union between the Presbyterian and Methodist congregations was consummated a year ago he remained on the field and filled the place to the satisfaction of all and the success that has attended the Union movement here has been in no small measure, due to the fact and influence of Mr. And Mrs. Kerr in their work among the people"*

The Kerr's left for Holbeck Saskatchewan. Rev. Kerr retired from active ministry 10 years prior to death in 1955 in Wolseley, Sask ([source: website Family Search.org](http://www.familysearch.org))

Our ancestors in faith were pragmatic, hardworking and unafraid to make bold decisions. They laid a strong foundation that we continue to benefit from today.