

A History of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Toronto

by: Tim McCabe

By the providence of God, the Free Church of Scotland, as the predominant form of Presbyterian Christianity in mid-nineteenth century Canada, had a profound impact on Toronto and what became Ontario. But in 1875 the four branches of Presbyterianism in Canada joined together. Thereafter, although the Free Church heritage continued to manifest itself, the Free Church as a distinct body ceased in Canada.

By 1921, however, a number of Highland Scots, recently emigrated to Toronto, men and women of faith and resolve, formed the "Toronto Gaelic Mission". The Mission was undenominational, but pledged to unqualified devotion to the Lord revealed in the Bible, and to adherence to the Westminster Confession, the Shorter Catechism, and to a simple form of worship. Its leader was Alexander MacKenzie, formerly of Inverness.

Mr. MacKenzie served diligently through the 1920s and well into the 1930s. From time to time, ministers and students of the Free Church came to Toronto (as well as to nascent congregations in Fort William (now Thunder Bay), Vancouver and Detroit), at the invitation of our grateful predecessors in this place, to conduct services and otherwise provide encouragement. Throughout this period, the Colonial Committee of the Free Church kept a watchful and sympathetic eye and assisted as it was able.

In 1928 the people, most of whom had belonged to the Free Church in their native land, petitioned the General Assembly to be raised to the status of a fully-sanctioned charge. That same year, the Rev. Duncan Macdougall of Vancouver, while ministering in Toronto in October, "reorganized the congregation".

Some time prior to 1931 seven faithful men were appointed "Trustees of the Ellis Street Free Church of Scotland (in connection with the Free Church of Scotland)" to hold property. By the grace of God in those days of economic depression, the people managed to raise sufficient funds to purchase land (from the Salvation Army of Canada) on the north side of Davenport Road just west of Yonge Street, and constructed the church building that was to be our temporal home from 1931 to 1976.



Original Mortgage for Land on the Davenport Site

The seriousness with which these men and women took their responsibilities directed by passages like Deut. 12:32 and chapter 21.1 of the Westminster Confession is clearly shown by the terms of the trust under which the trustees took the property (and under which our trustees today continue to hold our property). For example, the sixth condition of the trust is:

UPON TRUST, that the said Trustees acting for the time shall, at all times, permit and suffer the said Building or Place of Worship, to be used as aforesaid, only under the following conditions and limitations, which are hereby expressly provided and declared to be binding and irrevocable, namely:-

That the Congregation worshipping in the said Building or Place of Worship, and the Elders and Deacons, or Elders acting as Deacons, having the charge and management thereof, and each and every person permitted or suffered to preach and expound the Holy Scriptures, or to perform any act of Religious Worship, therein, adhere steadfastly to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the Divinely inspired Word of God, and to the Evangelical Doctrines contained therein, as these are set forth in the Subordinate Standards of the said Free Church of Scotland, namely:- The Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms, and Directory for Public Worship:

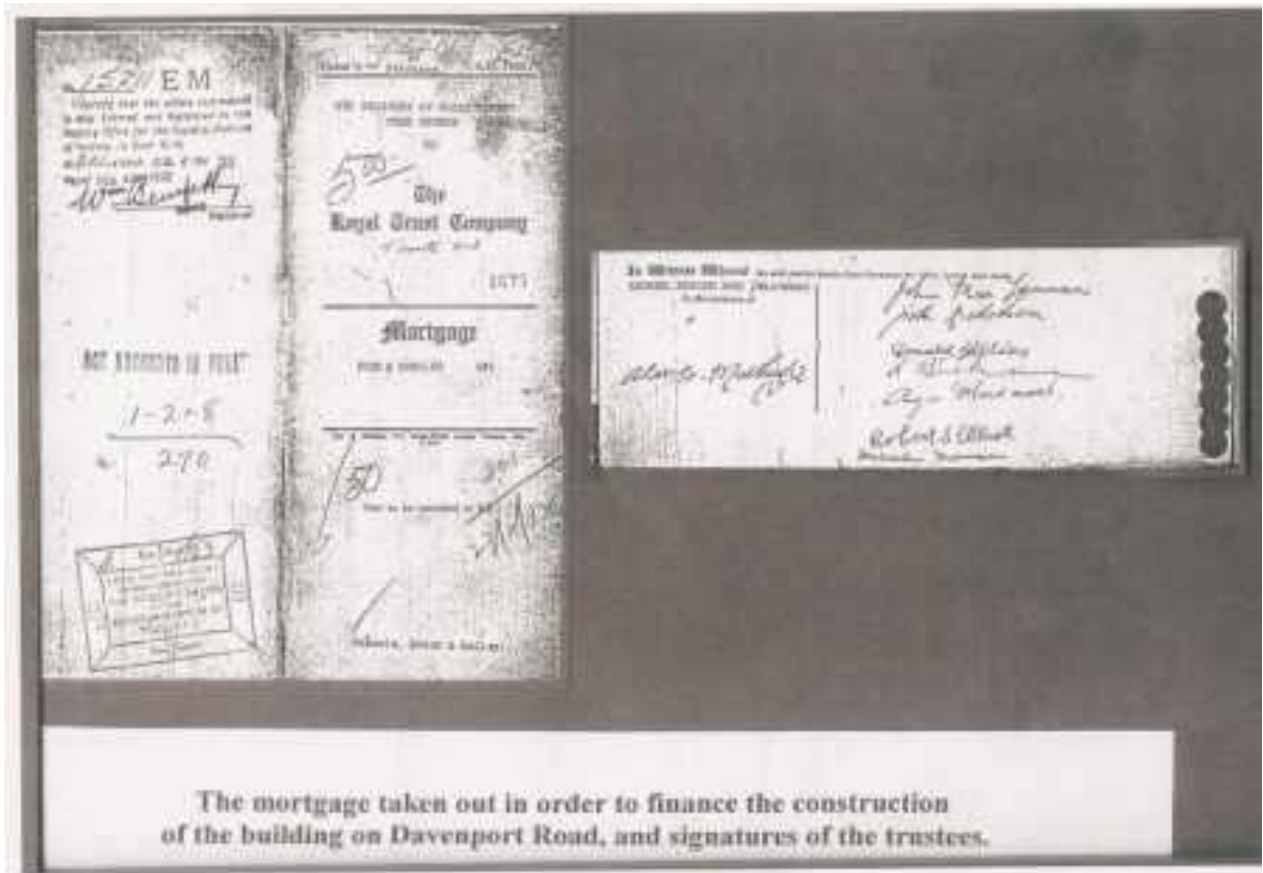
That at no time shall the Service of Praise be other than vocal in the worship of the congregation, and that no instrumental accompaniment be permitted, nor any musical instrument be allowed at any time within the said Building or Place of Worship, nor in any Sabbath-School or Prayer-Meeting in connection with the said Congregation: That no hymns or songs of human composition be used in the religious services of the Congregation or Sabbath-School, but the Inspired Psalmody

of the Church as contained in the Metrical Version of the Book of Psalms shall alone constitute the medium of Divine Praise: That no liturgical forms of Prayer or Worship be at any time introduced or allowed at any of the Religious Services of the Congregation:

That the services shall be maintained by the free-will offerings of the Congregation, and that no social function or secular entertainment, as a means of raising money for the support of the Lord's Work, be allowed in the said Building or Place of Worship, or in connection with the Congregation worshipping therein.

They also had due regard to the language of which they were heir. The fifth condition of the trust is:

UPON TRUST, that so long as there are resident within the district served by the said Building or Place of Worship, a sufficient number of people capable of understanding the Gaelic language and desirous of having services in that language, at least one service every Sabbath-day and one Prayer-Meeting every week shall be conducted in Gaelic; and that the Trustees shall not be bound to permit or suffer any person to preach or expound the Holy Scriptures, or to administer ordinances, or to perform any act of Religious Worship, in the said Building or Place of Worship, who is not capable of conducting such services in the Gaelic language, even although such person should be authorized or appointed by the General Assembly or other court of the said Free Church of Scotland:



The mortgage taken out in order to finance the construction of the building on Davenport Road, and signatures of the trustees.

The purchase of the property and construction of the building was financed by a loan of \$5,000.00 The mortgage securing the loan was paid off in 1940.

Throughout the depression and war years of the 1930s and '40s our forebears continued in true "doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, long suffering, love, perseverance" (2 Tim. 3: 10). As a report to the General assembly in 1931 observed:

Our brethren across the Atlantic are very much in need of settled Ministers. When deputies go out they are entreated to stay for a reasonably long period. The response to this request is not always encouraging, especially during the Winter. Nonetheless, many good men did respond to the "entreaty" and "went out" to serve in Toronto for varying periods, alongside the faithful leaders and people here.



The Davenport Road Building



Sunday School Picnic c. 1942-43

In the fullness of God's timing, in 1947, the Rev. John Macsween was sent to help out in Canada for a period of ten months. After returning home he was given by the Foreign and Overseas Missions Committee a roaming commission to serve the several congregations in Canada which were without pastors. He settled first in Fort William and helped also in Toronto, Winnipeg and Detroit. In 1951 he moved to Toronto where he became our first settled minister, serving until 1966. It was truly said of Rev. Macsween at the time of his death in 1982 that the focal point of his ministry was the edification of the Church of God and that "no one who sat for any length of time under his ministry could ever doubt that [that aspiration] was richly and blessedly fulfilled in a ministry that lasted over forty years".



A Wedding in the 1950s - Donald & Chrissie MacLean



Rev. John Macsween

Our minister from 1967 to 1973 was the Rev. J. N. (Jack) MacLeod, later Moderator of the Free Church. Again, we were greatly blessed by means of a true servant of God and His people.



Rev. Jack MacLeod



Sunday School Picnic c. 1970

Throughout the period 1947 to 1963 a young man named David Compton was part of the church. In 1977 he became our first (and so far only) Canadian Minister, serving until 1992. During that period, notable changes occurred in our life together. The Davenport Road site was sold and the church moved to our present location on Sheppard Avenue; we changed the name on our signboard to the "Evangelical Presbyterian Church"; and we adopted the North American Book of Psalms for Singing for purposes of worship. But, as before and after, we maintained under Rev. Compton a pure and uncompromising witness to the God revealed in the Bible and to the good news for all.



Rev. David Compton



Rev. David and Flora Compton

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Suite 1510
390 Bay Street
Toronto, Ontario
M5H 2Y2

July 20, 1976

Mike Smith,
Alderman, Ward 13,
Borough of North York,
5000 Yonge Street,
Willowdale, Ontario.
M2N 5V7

Dear Sir:

Re: Free Church of Scotland
593 Sheppard Avenue East

Further to the writer's telephone conversation with you and in confirmation of our discussion at that time, the Trustees of the Church would like the concerned neighbors and ratepayers to know that they welcome any inquiries with respect to the establishment of the church building at 593 Sheppard Avenue East.

The Ellis Street Free Church has consisted of a small congregation worshipping on Davenport Road for many years. At the moment, there are approximately 20 members in full communion and average church attendance would not exceed 60 persons.

The experience in the past has been that not more than ten cars would be utilized for transportation to the services, and it is apparent that this would in no wise create any traffic or parking problems since there are 14 parking spaces available in the church lands.

The adherents of this Church are quiet, sober, God-fearing people who will take a keen interest in the community and will welcome any neighbors or friends to attend their services.

As I mentioned to you on the telephone, the house on the lands will become the manse of the Church and will be occupied by its pastor, so that the property will be constantly attended to and will not be vacant to attract vandalism or other misuse thereof during the time that the Church is not in use.

Should your ratepayers desire any further or other information, the writer will be available, if necessary, to attend a meeting which you could arrange, and can arrange to have representatives of the Trustees of the Church present at this time.

Yours very truly,

Letter to North York Alderman (1976) about the Congregation's Relocation to 593 Sheppard Ave. East



593 Site with the Original Pulpit and Pews from the Davenport Road Site (before renovations)



Letter by David Compton in North York Mirror regarding Hope for a Canadian Reformed Presbyterian Church



593 Sheppard Ave E (in winter) before Parking Lot put in Front of Church building

In 1993 the Rev. Kenneth Stewart, another very godly young man, became our minister. Until he was "translated" to Stornaway in Lewis in 1996, he preached and served in Toronto with much distinction and much edification of the people.



Induction of Rev. Kenneth Stewart (behind are Rev. Donald McClure and Rev. Leigh Powell)



Rev. Kenneth Stewart and Family

In 1997, God's faithfulness to us was once more demonstrated by the coming of the Rev. D, Allan MacLeod to be our minister. On September 17, 2017 we recognized Allan's 20 years of faithful ministry in our congregation.



Rev. D. Allan MacLeod at Graduation



593 Sheppard Ave. East before the Subway Construction Commenced

From the time construction of the subway under Sheppard Ave E. began—it opened in 2002—the church property belonging to the congregation was eyed by developers. A few developers approached us and offered to buy out our property. We considered our options, such as buying an existing church building elsewhere in the city or purchasing a new property and building a new facility. However, a buyout would not have provided sufficient funds for the congregation to re-locate within the Toronto city limits. We also determined that we wished to retain our central location—we are ideally situated with a subway stop and major highway nearby. So, we decided it was best to work with a developer who would build us a new church building as part of a redevelopment of our property and an adjacent property. We documented a single-page of summary conditions for cooperation, and developed a set of detailed specifications for a new building—which we completed in 2006. When developers approached us, we supplied them with our summary conditions. If they agreed that they could meet these, we then gave them the detailed specifications. Eventually, Liberty Development Corp. was able to put together a proposed project. After about two years of negotiation with them we signed a purchase agreement, in June of 2010.





Interior of 593 Sheppard Ave. E. before move to 10 Thomas Clark Way

We began working with an architect, who had been commissioned by Liberty to design our new church building within the context of the overall re-development of our property and the one to the west. We reached agreement on the floor plans for the new building in 2012, while liberty pursued approval of the project from the city. The city required extensive re-working of the plans for the condominium development and some modifications to the church building plans. By mid-2014, Liberty had obtained tentative approval from the city and we resumed working with the architect to take the plans to the next level of detail—including production of finishing schedules, a design rendering, and a computer-based model for the acoustics for the proposed sanctuary.



Sanctuary in new building (2020)

In April, 2015 we signed-off on the transfer of title to our property. Construction of the new building began in the fall of 2015. The City granted an occupancy certificate on September 22nd, 2017. We held our first services in the new building on October 1st, 2017. The title to the property was transferred back to the congregation on 2020-04-30. In October, 2020, the City of Toronto changed our street address to 10 Thomas Clark Way, named after Thomas Clark a early settler who had a farm on the land where the EPC church building has been located since 1976.

In parallel with working with the developer of the new building, other momentous events were occurring in the life of our congregation. During David Compton's time as our pastor he had encouraged the congregation to consider becoming indigenous—to leave the Free Church of Scotland and align with a North American denomination. However, this initiative did not proceed beyond a discussion phase with the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) and other like-minded denominations.

In 2011, the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland voted to permit the use of mere-human compositions as worship and the use of musical instruments to accompany singing. The Elders of our congregation believed that this introduced an un-Biblical practice and that the change was contrary to a portion of the vows which the members of the General Assembly had taken at their ordination, in which they promised to conform to the form of worship practiced in the Free Church and renounce any position which was contrary to that form.

With the changes introduced by the Free Church, the Elders of this congregation reopened the idea of petitioning for admission to the RPCNA. Our pastor (Allan MacLeod) and an elder (Rod Finlayson) attended the RPCNA Synod in 2011. An application to join the RPCNA was submitted late in 2011. While our application was being considered by the RPCNA, the Pastor and Elders gave updates to the congregation and explained the reasons for leaving the Free Church of Scotland and for joining the RPCNA. Meanwhile, the congregation was informed that the 2014 General Assembly of the Free Church gave a Deliverance which stated, "The General Assembly recognise the particular circumstances of North American congregations and acknowledge that the movement of these congregations with indigenous denominations might be an appropriate step." This deliverance was a convincing indication that it was time for our congregation to align with a North American denomination which held to the same doctrinal position as our congregation.

We received notification in September, 2014 that our congregation would be received into the RPCNA. At a congregational meeting held in November 2014, the congregation voted overwhelmingly to join the RPNCA. Our congregation was formally received into the RPCNA on October 14, 2015.

At the Synod of the RPCNA in June 2022, the Canadian congregations were moved into a Canadian Presbytery, with the intention of forming a Reformed Presbyterian Church of Canada. In God's providence, David Compton's vision for Canadian Reformed Presbyterian Church may finally be realized. A Constitution for this new denomination has been approved by the Presbytery. The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Canada was officially organized at a service in Ottawa, the nation's capital on May 12, 2023.

We, of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Toronto, are a local congregation of the church universal, the body of Christ. We marvel and give thanks that we, with our brothers and sisters worldwide, are continuous with Israel, the seed of Abraham and God's covenant people. We acknowledge that we continue to exist in and through the Lord Jesus Christ and are therefore part of the reality in which His people are called out from every tongue and tribe and nation in order to fulfil the covenantal promise to bless all families and nations.

In the meantime, we joyfully share in the life of this local congregation, worshipping in spirit and in truth, accepting the nurture and discipline of the church, and sharing its ministry and witness. Amen, until the Lord returns.

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Cor 12.27)

"... so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known ..." (Eph 3.10)

Acknowledgements: Our thanks go to Tim McCabe who wrote the original text of this history and to the other members of the McCabe family who designed and produced the church history display for our congregation's 75th anniversary. Our thanks also go to all those in the congregation who provided pictures and shared their memories with us, making the production of this history possible. [Additions to this history were provided by Jim Hughes (October 2015, March 2017, October 2017, November 2020, December 2022).]

Addendum – EPC is located at 10 Thomas Clark Way

"Thomas Clark: In 1841, Thomas Clark purchased 200 acres of land, Lot 15, Concession 2 East, on the south side of Sheppard Avenue from Bayview Avenue to Leslie Street, where the street to be renamed is located. His first wife, Elinor Linton, died in 1844, after having seven children. Later he married Nancy Miller, whose family farmed Lot 16, Concession 2 East, on the north side of Sheppard Avenue. After first building a log cabin, in 1855, he built Barberrry House for his growing family, which would eventually include thirteen children. He named the house Barberrry Place after the many barberrry bushes that once grew there. The house is still standing at present-day 9 Barberrry Place, and was designated under Part IV the Ontario Heritage Act by the former City of North York on June 22, 1994. The house is of unusual construction. The fieldstone foundation is eighteen inches thick. The exterior walls are three bricks thick. All the lumber used to build the house is white pine, which was cut on the property. The wall laths are hand-split pine. All the interior trim is handmade, unique to the house. Thomas Clark's land was the site of early schoolhouses in the area. In 1848, a brick schoolhouse, S.S. #11, was built facing Sheppard Avenue on land that had been Thomas Clark's, to replace the log schoolhouse that was reported as early as 1826 by a School Superintendent. In 1874, Thomas Clark sold one-half acre of his land for the construction of a new red brick schoolhouse to replace the 1848 schoolhouse. Located next to the church, the red brick school in School Section #11 stood until 1910, when it was replaced by the Oriole Public School, which was itself demolished in 1966. Thomas Clark was a community leader who held meetings in his log cabin for the Wesleyan Methodists of Oriole, the hamlet at the corner of Leslie Street and Sheppard Avenue. It was from this founding class that the Oriole-York Mills United Church developed. By 1852, Clark's class was mentioned in Methodist records, and by 1853, it was one of twelve preaching points of the Methodist Yonge Street circuit. The group later moved into the brick schoolhouse on Clark's original property, and finally into a church also built on Clark's property in 1873. In 1875, Thomas Clark transferred the 4/10th acre of land where the church was built to the "Trustees of Clark's Congregation of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Canada in connection with the English Conference". They were known as Clark's Congregation of the Wesleyan Methodist Page 3 of 6 Church until around 1878, then as East York. In 1913, the congregation became the Oriole Methodist Church, until it was renamed the Oriole United Church in 1925. In 1959, it became the Oriole-York Mills United Church. In 1962, a new church was dedicated at 2609 Bayview Avenue. The original brick church building was dismantled in 1965. On September 28, 2014, the new church was renamed the Bayview United Church when the Oriole-York Mills United Church and the Centennial-Japanese United Church officially amalgamated. The most important reason to rename the street between Rean Drive and Barberrry Place to commemorate important early settler, Thomas Clark, is that Barberrry Place, the house he built in 1855, at present-day 9 Barberrry Place, is the only structure from the community's pioneer past which still survives in the area. It was designated under Part IV the Ontario Heritage Act by the former City of North York on June 22, 1994. Both a church and a schoolhouse were built in the 1800s on Thomas Clark's land, but they have long been demolished. It would be very fitting for the unassumed street between Barberrry Place and Rean Drive to be renamed to commemorate pioneer, Thomas Clark, who contributed so much to the community at the time, and into the future." [Source: City of Toronto: *Renaming of Karen's Way extending between Barberrry Place and Rean Drive*; April 3, 2019.]