

A Forgotten Anniversary (1813-2013): The Presbyterian Motherkirk in South Africa *Die Presbiteriannse Moederkerk in Suid-Afrika*

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2013 marked the 200th anniversary of the constitution of the first Presbyterian congregation in South Africa and, almost for certain, also on the whole continent of Africa. This historic event occurred in Cape Town, the Mother City; hence it is fitting that the nickname of this first congregation in Afrikaans is *Die Presbiteriannse Moederkerk*. The organisation took place on 6 May, 1813 in the Chapel of the South African Missionary Society, Long Street. As with any formal organisation, there is a story behind this event. What follows is a brief synopsis of that story and a brief outline of some early developments of this church in Cape Town.

A Scottish Regiment and Rev. George Thom (LMS)

In 1806 the British occupied the Cape for a second time. As a result, the Cape became a garrison for British soldiers; one of the regiments was the 93rd Sutherland Highlanders. Within this regiment were men of pious, evangelical and Reformed convictions, and they formed themselves into a society in 1808, not a church. It was known as The Calvinist Society. They worshipped, prayed, studied, and collected money for gospel work as a society.

When Rev. George Thom arrived in Cape Town on 24 October, 1812 en route to India, he met with The Calvinist Society and began preaching for them. Rev. Thom was a Church of Scotland minister, having been ordained in London at the Scots Kirk, London Wall to work as a missionary with the London Missionary Society (LMS). He had travelled out with John Campbell, also with the LMS. It was decided that Thom would remain at the Cape and in effect become the agent for the LMS and work with the slaves, KhoiKhoi, and prisoners.



Rev. George Thom

In addition to this work with the LMS, Thom proceeded to organise the first Presbyterian congregation in South Africa by receiving forty members of The Calvinist Society into a new church with a proper constitution and with local Presbyterian church government. One may well debate which was Thom's primary job, but in all likelihood the bulk of his financial support

came from the newly organised congregation. Thus on 6 May, 1813 a church constitution was adopted. The first article reads as follows:

1. Doctrine. The doctrines contained in the Catechism of the Westminster Divines, which, in sum, is that which is believed by the Reformed Churches on the Continent of Europe and the Kirk of Scotland.

The first communion service was held on the first Sabbath in July 1813 and ninety sat at the table. Then on 5 August, 1813 six elders were elected “according to the Westminster Confession of Faith” (an interesting statement); two weeks later two became elders. It would appear the others became deacons at that time. There is some confusion about the numbers appointed and some literature refers to some of these as “assistants”. Members of the congregation were gathered from the public in Cape Town and also from the regiment. The church grew and embraced those with a diversity of backgrounds – Church of Scotland, Scottish Secessionist Presbyterians, Scottish Baptists, Scottish Congregationalists, and also Church of England. The congregation was perhaps about 200 within the year. However, in 1814 the congregation shrank dramatically to a mere twenty-seven members (both civil and military) as the 93rd Regiment was removed to Britain for service, then to North America. Thom wrote in a letter from the Cape in 1814 (which is quoted in part by Gordon Balfour in his *Presbyterianism in the Colonies* about the first “British Presbyterian Church in Cape Colony”):

When the 93rd Highlanders left Cape Town last month there were among them 156 members of the Church (including three elders and three deacons) all of whom, so far as man can know the heart from the life, were pious persons. The Regiment was certainly a pattern from morality and good behaviour to every other corps. They read their Bible; they observed the Sabbath; they saved their money in order to do good; 7000 rix dollars (1,400 pounds currency) the non-commissioned officers and privates gave for books, societies, and support of the Gospel – a sum perhaps unparalleled in any other corps in the world, given in the short span of 17 or 18 months . . . but if ever apostolic days were revived in modern times on earth I certainly believe some of these to have been granted to us in Africa. (Gordon Balfour, *Presbyterianism in the Colonies*, 1899, 233-234)

Rev. Thom continued to serve as the minister for this congregation and also as an agent for the LMS. This arrangement continued until 1818, when Rev. Thom accepted a call to become the minister of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in Caledon, Cape Colony and also to undertake mission work amongst the slaves and KhoiKhoi. It would appear the reason for this change was twofold. First, there were tensions in the LMS in 1817-1818 at the Cape.

Second, it was now obvious that the local Scottish Church was not in a financial position to fund Thom. This left the Scottish Church vacant for two years until the arrival of Rev. John Philip and his appointment in 1820 to the church, again combining it with work for the LMS. John Philip was a Congregationalist who knew Thom well, as Thom had once been a member of Philip's congregation in Aberdeen. Philip led the congregation to formally adopt a Congregational polity, where all appeals were to go to the congregational meeting. It would appear that the Presbyterians were a minority after the 1820 reorganization yet remained within this reorganized congregation and worshipped there, hence the name "Union" Chapel – reflective of being Congregational *and* Presbyterian.

Technically the first Presbyterian Church in South Africa lasted for seven years, 1813-1820. However four years later, in 1824, a provisional committee was formed to "re-establish" or "resuscitate" a Presbyterian church in Cape Town. This committee was likely induced for three reasons: immigration from Britain in the ensuing four years; employees coming to the Cape from the East India Company who advocated for a separate Presbyterian Church; and, the prospect of soliciting government funds.

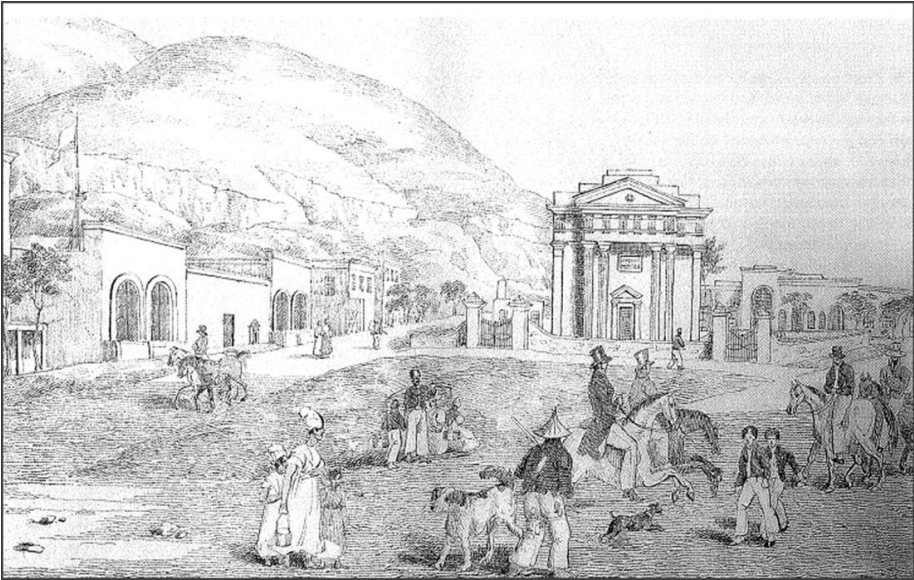
The names of the work both in 1813 and in 1824 appear variously as the Scotch Church, the Scottish Church, or the Scottish National Church, thus reflecting ethnicity and affinities to the established Church of Scotland. The 1824 committee knew that this time they needed government money to make the work succeed.

Rev. James Adamson, Rev. George Morgan

The provisional committee was given permission by the governor (Somerset) to hold a public meeting in the Lutheran Church on Strand Street on 25 November, 1824 under the chairmanship of Mr. Alexander MacDonald. Advisors at this meeting included DRC ministers Rev. Andrew Murray, Sr. of Graaff-Reinet and Rev. Smith of Uitenhage, who addressed the public gathering about Presbyterian church government. Other matters dealt with at the meeting included making resolutions to be "connected" with the Church of Scotland, to begin a subscription to build their own church building, and to communicate with presbyteries in Scotland and the General Assembly to promote the work here in Cape Town.

This provisional committee lasted from 25 November, 1824 until 1828, when a session was formed. Land was acquired for the Scotch Church in April 1825 on Somerset Street. The Government pledged one third of the cost of the building. An architect was secured, Henry Willey Reveley (1789-1875), and he designed a building in the Greek Revival style with a prominent Doric portico – not a hint of any neo-Gothic in this building! The foundation stone was laid on 20 October, 1827 and the building was opened officially in May 1829. It can still be seen today in Cape Town. Though a building does not make a congregation, it can be a great aid for ministry and mis-

sion and convenience. From 1813 until this building was opened, the Presbyterians had met in Die Groote Kerk, the Lutheran Church, the South African Missionary Society premises, and the LMS/Union Chapel premises.



The provisional committee also made efforts to secure a minister. This request was finally remitted by the General Assembly in Scotland to the Presbytery of Edinburgh. They located a candidate, James Adamson of the Presbytery of Cupar, and he was ordained “as a minister of the Gospel and as Pastor of the Scottish Church at Cape Town, Cape of Good Hope”. Adamson arrived at the Cape in November 1827 and began preaching immediately. Services were held in the Lutheran Church building. He formed a session with assessors; one was a minister in the DRC (Rev. James Edgar). In May of 1829 a full Kirk session was formed.

In August 1829 the trustees adopted the new name of St. Andrew’s. This name change was not without controversy. Mr. James Abercrombie protested the use of this name as “a relic of Popery”. For several years after, the name seems to have gone back and forth between the Scottish Church and St. Andrew’s but with the dominant name being the Scottish Church. Only after the later 1880s was it consistently called St. Andrew’s. One scholarly paper uses both names together as one name – “St. Andrew’s Scottish Church”, which evidently was also a name the congregation was referred to as in the mid-19th century. If one looks to Australia and some of the first names for Presbyterian churches there, one finds striking parallels. First, the word “Presbyterian” is not often used and the word “Scots” and even “St. Andrew’s Scots Church” appears frequently. Hence, there was nothing very unusual here in Cape Town.

Rev. Adamson continued to fan the flame for local mission work. This was accelerated greatly after Emancipation. Appeals were made to Scotland

for the General Assembly to send out a missionary to help with the St. Andrew's Mission but to no avail. Thus it was decided to employ Rev. G. W. Stegman(n), minister of the Lutheran Church at the time, to conduct the Mission. Mr. W. Gorrie was also appointed as a lay assistant, and support came from both the Dutch Reformed Church and the Lutheran Church. This mission work increased; and in time there was a re-alignment, not without acrimony, whereby the bulk of this Mission became a congregation within the Dutch Reformed Church under Rev. Stegman, who also joined the Dutch Reformed Church. The Scottish Mission continued on a smaller scale with a mission school attached to the Church. Adamson's successor, Rev. Morgan, was directly involved in the Scottish Mission by preaching in Dutch for the mission services.

Rev. Adamson not only was pastoring the Scottish Church but also was very involved with the South African College. He had a great burden for that institution and did all that he could to ensure that it did not collapse. Thus, in a certain sense the story of the Scottish Church is also connected to the history of higher education in the Cape.

Rev. Adamson resigned as minister of St. Andrew's in 1841 yet remained as "assistant" for some time until he eventually went to Oxford, Pennsylvania for educational work there before returning to the Cape Colony to retire. Rev. Morgan had come out to Cape Colony as one of George Thom's recruits and served the Dutch Reformed Church in Somerset East from 1824 to 1841, and the Scottish Church, Cape Town from 1841 to 1871. Under his ministry the congregation prospered with the need for a gallery to be added, and a mission day school building was built next to the church. This mission day school gained a strong reputation in Cape Town.

The Scottish Church, Cape Town experienced some division when the Disruption occurred in Scotland, as some charged the Church here with local patronage and Erastianism. The result was that a Free Church congregation and mission emerged in Cape Town in 1846. The matter of patronage and Erastianism was not exactly clear in all regards in the Cape Town work. Rev. Morgan took up his pen to defend the cause of the Scottish Church by claiming freedom from patronage, while at the same time extolling the benefits of the Establishment for the Scottish Church in Cape Town. A summary of Morgan's arguments reads as follows:

. . . the said Scottish Church [Cape Town] was an isolated Presbyterian congregation, that it was not under the jurisdiction of the Church of Scotland, and that the Government, though giving pecuniary aid, had never claimed the right of patronage with regard to the appointment of the ministers. (*St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Cape Town: A Centenary Record*, 14)

When Rev. Adamson was ordained for the work in Cape Town, he had been ordained for the congregation there; but the Presbytery of Edinburgh

had no jurisdiction over the congregation and never inducted him. Was the Scottish Church, Cape Town thus under the Church of Scotland, and could it be charged with Erastianism? (This makes me think of a similar situation when the Free Church of Scotland Presbytery of Edinburgh ordained a man for Prince Edward Island, Canada in 1938, yet at that time they had no jurisdiction over the congregations to which he was ordained. These things do happen for the furtherance of the gospel. Is the essence of Presbyterianism violated?) Not all agreed, and so a Free Church of Scotland congregation and mission were formed in Cape Town in 1846 under Rev. W. Gorrie and Rev. E. Miller. Rev. Gorrie was ordained at Free St. George's, Edinburgh in 1846 for the work in Cape Town. However, large sympathies were never really there in Cape Town for the Free Church, and it was a hard task to establish another Scottish Presbyterian mission work there. The result was that, due to financial constraints, in 1851 the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland closed the work in Cape Town and sold the property there to pay for debts incurred. Gorrie had once worked with the Scottish Church, Cape Town before the Disruption as a lay-assistant missionary and also taught at the South African College. Thus ended a short chapter of Free Church of Scotland work in Cape Town in the 1840s and early 50s.

Though the Scottish Church, Cape Town was a Presbyterian entity without a presbytery, it did have close fraternity with the evangelical movement within the Dutch Reformed Church. A summary review of these connections is helpful. Recall that Revs. Smith and Murray of the DRC had addressed the public meeting in which Presbyterianism was re-established in Cape Town in 1824. In fact, it was from the DRC where at least one assessor elder came under Adamson for about two years (1828-29). But it went beyond this. Thom of course was key for all of this initially, but this remained a constant for Adamson and Morgan. For example, Rev. Adamson was at the famous Worcester Conference 18-19 April, 1860 and while there spoke about revival in America. Likewise, at the opening of the Huguenot School in Wellington, South Africa in 1873, Rev. Morgan was there and spoke about the French Huguenots. The close ties with the Scottish evangelical group within the Dutch Reformed Church continued for many years by the Presbyterian Motherkirk and her ministers. In some senses one can argue the relationship to the Scottish ministers in the DRC and to the Scottish Church was a "quasi-presbytery" to this very isolated solo Presbyterian congregation.

Summary Conclusion

It is good to remember how and where in God's providence the first Presbyterian Church in South Africa and likely all of Africa was established. Its roots were not with a carefully developed missions strategy nor with a sending society as such. Rather, the core foundation was laid by laymen who gathered as a society of like-minded believers to do good and to nurture one another. They needed shepherding and a young twenty-four year old Scot stepped into that gap. It is also a reminder that church planting is not always

a straight road of continuous growth and development. Thom's time with this new congregation spanned about six years; and then there was a vacancy for two years followed by absorption for four years into a Union Chapel context, which was of course closely related yet still distinct from an evangelical Presbyterian church. Then came about the "resuscitation", and here we find Establishment issues as part of the history in the colonial African context and eventually a short-lived division over this. Also running together in this brief overview of the beginning years of the Motherkirk's development was local missions work. This work certainly never developed to the extent that was seen in the Eastern Cape by Scottish Presbyterians there.

As 2013 marked the 200th anniversary of Presbyterianism in South Africa, some also claimed that year as the 200th anniversary of the founding of Congregationalism in South Africa! And yes, in a sense both are true as both trace their origins to the 1813 congregation formed by Thom that went two ways by 1824, one reasserting its Presbyterian polity and the other its Congregational.

Today there are many Presbyterian churches throughout various regions of Africa, yet there must always be a first. The history of the Presbyterian Motherkirk in South Africa is a story that intertwines the colonial and the missionary, the transitional and the permanent, the ecclesiastical controversies of home and the realities and complexities of a new context. On this anniversary occasion, there is still much to ponder of the first Presbyterian congregation on the African continent.

This paper also raises the question concerning who may be called the founder of Presbyterianism in South Africa or Africa? Some have claimed James Adamson. This is very questionable for several reasons, not least being that there were Scottish Presbyterian missionaries and settlers in the Eastern Cape who had predated Adamson's arrival. Was it George Thom? Was it actually laity? Each of the above may be correct in some sense.

In the next few years there are going to be many Presbyterian anniversaries to celebrate, such as the first Presbyterian mission in the Eastern Cape and also the first Presbytery in the Eastern Cape and in all of Africa! These anniversaries will provide great opportunities to explore the Presbyterian heritage on the African continent.

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