

Narrative of the Rise and Progress of the United Presbyterian Body in Carsphairn

*As Read on the occasion of Laying Memorial Stone of New Church.
26th September 1892.*

Mr James McCulloch then stepped forward and read the following narrative of the case:

In preparing a short narrative of the formation of our little congregation in connection with the United Presbyterian Church, we trust that it will be considered as unnecessary as we deem it undignified to allude to the prime cause of our secession from the Established Church, further than may be absolutely necessary to define our position. That unfortunate occurrence, so notorious for a number of years as the Carsphairn scandal, took its rise in March 1883, now over nine years ago. The attitude of the congregation in regard to the case was significant from the very outset; and, practically in a body, they absented themselves from ordinances, pending investigation. That investigation was prolonged over two years; and during a great portion of that time the congregation was left entirely without regular public worship. Finding it impossible to return to the church in the meanwhile, yet feeling keenly the lack of the ordinary means of grace, the congregation, sometime about the beginning of 1884, entered into an arrangement with the Rev Alexander Paterson, U.P. minister of Dalry, whereby regular services were held every Sabbath. It must be noted that this, our initial connection with the United Presbyterian Church, was understood by both parties to the arrangement as only a temporary accommodation, the congregation still remaining in communion with the Established Church. These services, we may add, were very popular, and were attended with much benefit, no doubt contributing to lay the foundation for our closer identification with the Church today. After some months these services were discontinued; and, owing to the action of the Established Church Presbytery, from the autumn of 1884 occasional services were held in the church of which the people could conscientiously avail themselves.

But when, in the spring of 1885, the final decision of the courts enabled the incumbent to resume all his functions, the people left the church in even larger proportions than formerly. These decisions were probably unavoidable owing to the constitution of the church, but were very far from satisfying the instincts or prejudices of the people. In consequence, the congregation were again left without ordinances, though still in communion with the Established Church. Shortly after this period the congregation decided that it was desirable that they should connect themselves with one or other of the great dissenting bodies. The great majority favoured the United Presbyterians, and it was decided that they approach the U.P. Presbytery of Dumfries with a view of forming themselves into a mission station of that Church. This was accomplished, and the great majority of the people received into the United Presbyterian communion, a number more attending as adherents. The work of the station continued with marked success, and without disturbance, till the spring of 1888. During these three years – 1885-88 – the people enjoyed the exceptionally able and earnest administrations of Mr A. B. Cape, now of Cupar; Mr Wm. Storrar, now of Urr; and the Rev. James Stark, Edinburgh, some time minister of Lumsden.

In the spring of 1888 a movement was set on foot by certain heritors and parishioners to bring pressure on the Established Presbytery of Kirkcudbright in order to find a remedy for the schism in the parish on an Established Church basis. The main point was to effect a compromise by which the present incumbent should retire and an assistant be appointed. It was seen that this movement would be likely seriously to

affect the welfare of the mission station, as many of the people still retained their old affection for the Establishment, and were driven from it only by force of circumstances. But as any action in the matter was delayed, and not finally consummated for over two years, the work of the station continued, though under some difficulty. In June 1889 the managers took steps to ascertain the feeling of the congregation in the event of a compromise being affected and the Parish Church reopened to the people. The result showed that 30 members in full communion signified their intention of remaining in the U. P. Church at all hazards. When the division actually took place a year afterwards, we found, not 30, but nearly 50 on our side. Our numbers at present are about the same. Knowing now the ground on which they stood, the managers determined still to carry on the station, at least until such time as a disruption occurred. This was effected in 1890, when a large proportion of the people went back to the Established Church.

With diminished numbers we soon found it out of our power to carry on the work as hitherto, on our own responsibility, particularly as the wealthier and more influential members had all gone from us; so in August of that year a deputation was appointed to wait on the Presbytery to announce that the station would require to be discontinued, and to ask that the remaining members be received as an auxiliary portion of Dalry congregation. Our request was granted, and since that date we have held the position we now occupy. Such is a brief outline of our history as connected with the United Presbyterian Church; and we will notice shortly the steps which have been taken in order to remove the lack of a suitable place of worship. We may premise that during all these years our services have been held in the Schoolroom, which has always been freely and ungrudgingly granted by successive School Boards. But its accommodation was manifestly unsuitable, and could not be relied on as a permanency, and it was felt that a church of our own was indispensable. The first step in that direction was made in 1888; but the time was inopportune, and it was allowed to drop. The difficulties of the situation for the next two years kept the matter in abeyance, but in June 1891 the proposal was revived, and steps were at once taken to secure a site. This was not finally concluded till December. In the meantime the Presbytery had been consulted, and cordially approved of our efforts, giving us all the advice and assistance in their power. The Home Mission Board made us a grant of £150 from their Church Extension Fund, and we had good encouragement and promises of help from many quarters in the Church. Early in the present year plans, &c., were prepared by Mr Stevenson, architect, Ayr, and generally approved by the Presbytery, and the Home Mission Board, as well as the feudal superior. After vexatious but unavoidable delays, estimates were solicited, and tenders for the various departments were accepted early in August. The church and vestry, with the extra expenses necessary to enclose the ground, &c., is expected to cost something like £500; but we hope to be able to open our little church free of debt.

We have now traced, step by step, our progress for nine years, brimful of difficulty and perplexity. Our way has often been dark and mysterious; we have stumbled at times and been wellnigh discouraged; yet, with the help of God, we have been enabled to press forward to a measure of success which until a few years ago appeared like a fond dream, but which to-day is well on the way to become an accomplished fact. This stone, which will now be laid in its place, will indeed be a memorial stone to us. It will be a memorial of much heartburning and trouble, of many doubts and fears; but it will also be a memorial of faith, and hope, and earnest devotion to principle, and we may well call it our "Ebenezer", and say, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." Yes, he has been our help in the dark past; we feel sure He is in our midst now; and we feel hopeful for the future, for if we will be faithful to our trust, though talents be few and our sphere of work limited, we know that our God will never forsake us.