

St. Aidan's United Church 1873 – present, written by Barbara Brown

In 1873, there were few homes in the Cedar Hill-Mount Tolmie area, now then as Cedar Plains. Among the settlers in the district were the families of George Dean, Henry King, John Irvine, Merriman and Todd. Some of these families longed for a Presbyterian Church service which they had been brought up on in Britain.

From 1860 to 1862, there had been Anglican services held in John Irvine's home at Rose Bank Farm. These services were held under Bishop Hills. In his diary he wrote, "There were twelve persons in the congregation and ten children and one adult in the Sunday School." This was the beginning of church services in the Cedar Hill District- St. Luke's Anglican Church dates from 1860 – from this humble beginning.

On October 26, 1862, a school chapel was opened on the site of the present St. Luke's Church on Cedar Hill Road. This building served as the church, Sunday school and day school.

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church was the mother church of St. Aidan's. In 1873, Rev. Simon MacGregor, of Victoria began preaching in outer parishes, including Esquimalt, Craigflower and Cedar Plains. St. Aidan's history begins from this period, with services being held in the original Cedar Hill school chapel.

Many have asked through the years, "Who was St. Aidan?" St. Aidan was an early (635 A. D.) missionary, a monk in the Monastery of Iona, an island in the Hebrides of Scotland. He was known as St. Aidan the Gentle.

A message came to the Monastery at Iona from King Oswald of Northumbria begging them to send missionaries to convert his people. The Abbot in charge gladly agreed to do so. A monk was sent but was unsuccessful and returned to Iona. St Aidan was sent to take his place where he did good work. He trained boys to become clergymen, several of whom became Bishops of the Anglican Church. By his gentleness and humility, he conquered the people of Northumbria and won them to the Christian faith. St. Aidan's Day in the Anglican Church is celebrated on August 31<sup>st</sup>.

The Presbyterians of the Cedar Plains district purchased a parcel of land from the Anglican Synod on Cedar Hill Cross Road, in the shadow of Mt. Tolmie. At that time, money was scarce so it was a long time before the Presbyterians were able to build a church. The Anglican Synod, however, owned 600 acres from the Tolmie Farm, now Braefoot Estates on the west to Cadboro Bay Road on the east, including Mt. Tolmie.

In 1886, Rev. D. McRae was appointed by the Victoria Presbytery as Missionary to Cedar Plains Anglican services for six months, while Rev. McRae took leave to be married.

Once Presbyterian services began in the Cedar Hill Chapel, the women soon formed a group called the “Working Club” and nearly twenty years later had saved enough money to purchase the land for their own church.

In the early days, fund-raising was done by holding lectures, which included guest speakers from the city. Tickets were easy to sell and it was a night out for the whole family.

Following Rev. Knowles’ six-month ministry, another student – Rev. A Chisholm – filled in until Rev. R. G. Murison was appointed as pastor. In the meantime, Rev. McRae went to Victoria West parish.

Under the leadership of Rev. Morrison, money was borrowed to build a church. This was accomplished with much volunteer labour and sacrifice and so the first Church of St. Aidan appeared. It was a simple wooden structure holding approximately 150 people. The lighting was supplied by oil lamps fastened to the wall with reflectors behind them to intensify the dim light.

The Irvine Family’s organ was transported to the church each Sunday by horse and wagon until the congregation was able to purchase its own. Margaret Irvine, youngest daughter of John Irvine, was organist for many years.

Some of the names early faithful church workers include: the Sinclairs from Cadboro Bay, the Sommers from Gordon Head, the George Davidson family and James Taylor, who was remembered always for singing “The Ninety and Nine.” Other notable workers were the McRae family of Twin Oaks, the John Irvine family of Rose Bank Farm, and the Dean Maynard, Scott and Glendening families.

When the church structure was completed, the following article was published in the Daily Colonist newspaper of November 20, 1894 to mark the official opening of St. Aidan’s Church on November 18, 1894:

The dedication and opening services of the Church of St. Aidan on Sunday last were largely attended both by residents of the district and city folk, there scarcely being sitting room for all. Among the clergymen present in their robes were Rev. D. McRae, Rev. J.W. McMillan of Vancouver, Rev. W.L. Clay and Rev. R.G. Murison. Rev. Clay read the lessons, while Rev. McRae offered the congregational prayers and Rev. Murison those of dedication.

An eloquent helpful and practical sermon was preached by Rev. McMillan. The music was appropriate, the singing being led by a large choir, while John G. Brown gave several solos in his best style. Miss Irvine was the organist.

It must have been a lengthy service, with 19 items on the programme.

Several years later, the following article appeared in the Daily Colonist:

## **Miss Irvine remembered by St. Aidan's Congregation**

At the close of the Christmas tree in connection with St. Aidan's Presbyterian Sunday School, Cedar Hill, last Thursday evening, an address was read to Miss Margaret Irvine, church organist, by Rev. A Fraser, Miss Dean's presented her with a handsome case of silver spoons. Miss Irvine gave a brief response and Messrs. Taylor and Aiken gave short congratulatory addresses.

After the opening of the church in 1894, the women changed the name of the "Working Club" to the "Ladies Auxiliary." Over the years the club's name changed many times from "Ladies Aid," to "Ladies Guild" to "United Church Women," its current name. It was always the women who raised extra money when an extra cord of wood was needed for the furnace or the minister's salary was short.

In 1912, under the direction of Mr. E.J. Merritt, the church manse was built. Again, the money was raised by the women of the church through concerts, teas and 'lantern slides', the early version of slide shows.

A sample of early expenditures is typified in this quote from the Manager's minute book of 1921. It states:

"The Secretary was asked to see if he could secure the services of Alistair Merritt at \$1.00 per month. The work required to light the fires Sundays and choir practice light and sweep and dust the church once a week. A pile of railway ties has been secured fuel. It was decided to engage someone to cut them in suitable lengths for the furnace."

From the beginning of the Presbyterian services at Cedar Hill in 1873 until 1925, all went smoothly. The Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian denominations had been meeting to discuss becoming one denomination, throughout Canada, and eventually these three became the United Church of Canada. St. Aidan's lost several very staunch members as a result of this merger including the preacher, Rev. David Lister, and the Sunday School superintendent, George Davidson.

Rev. M.D. McKee was the first minister after union. His wife was very involved with the young people of the church and held weekly meetings in her home. At this time, a community hall was built by the congregation, under the direction of Mr. E. J. Merritt and Mr. C. F. Dawson, to give the boys of the district a place to share in activities such as basketball and badminton. Sunday school was also held in the hall. On November 30, 1924, the hall was dedicated with Rev. Joseph McCoy presiding.

On November 17, 1925, a chicken dinner was held in the new hall at a cost of 75 cents for each adult and 25 cents for children. Two hundred fifty tickets were sold and 31 chickens and one goose were donated.

The original church building was renovated in 1934, during Depression years, under the leadership of Rev. Harold Armitage. Beautiful stained glass windows were purchased from the demolished home of Sir Richard McBride, who had been Premier in British Columbia from 1903 to 1915. The reopening services were held on November 29, 1934. The transformation of St. Aidan's was praised by all who entered the doors of the church.

The well-known author, Nellie McClung, lived in the Gordon Head district at this time. After a call from Rev. Armitage, Mr. and Mrs. Wesley McClung transferred their memberships to St. Aidan's from the Metropolitan Church. Mrs. McClung became an elder in St. Aidan's, the first women elder in the United Church of Canada. She taught adult Bible class and, when she spoke from the pulpit on special Sundays, the church was overflowing.

Following Rev. Armitage, Rev. Thomas Griffiths was appointed and remained for fourteen years, the longest appointment in the church's history. By 1956, the congregation had expanded and the original church was too small. So, as plans were being worked on for a new church, services were held in the community hall.

On June 17, 1960, Rev. Ibbs Avery dedicated the new church of St. Aidan, built to hold 500 people. In 1969, a new community building was opened by Rev. Alistair McLeod. In 1970, Rev. Rae Allan dedicated a pipe organ in the church, a long-cherished dream of the congregation.

In November 1998, the people of St. Aidan's will celebrate 125 years of history in the Cedar Hill-Mt. Tolmie area. These reminiscences are just a small sample of the work and influence the church of St. Aidan has had in this district.

Written by Barbara Brown (Dawson)

## **Ministers of St. Aidan's Congregation**

### **Before the Union of 1925**

1873	Rev. Simon MacGregor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church began services at Cedar Hill School Chapel
1886	Rev. D. McRae appointed
1889	R.E. Knowles, Student Minister
1893	A Chisholm, Student Minister
1894	St. Aidan's Church dedicated Rev. R. G. Morrison Appointed
1895-99	Rev. J.C. Forster
1899-	Rev. Alex Fraser
1903	
1903-08	Rev. Joseph McCoy
1908-10	Rev. R. W. Collins
1910-16	Rev. W. J. Kidd
1912	Manse Built

1916-17 Rev. John MacPhee  
1917-20 Rev. D. A Smith  
1920-21 Rev. David Lister  
1921-22 Rev. E. H. Gray  
1922-25 Rev. M.D. McKee  
**1925 formation of the United Church of Canada**  
1925-28 Rev. M.D. McKee  
1928-30 Rev. S. Galbraith  
1930-35 Rev. H.J. Armitage  
1935-51 Rev. I. G. Griffiths  
1951-56 Rev. L. Clerihue  
1956-61 Rev. Ibbs Avery  
1960 New Church Dedicated  
1961-69 Rev. A. McLeod  
1969-81 Rev. J. Rae Allan  
1969 Community Services Building Completed  
1975-79 Rev. Clare Holmes  
1977 Rev. Geoff Smith, Retired Assistant  
1980 Sher Kozak, Interim, George Stagen, Interim  
1981-85 Rev. Keith Howard  
1982-91 Rev. Eric Stephanson  
1985-86 Jara Smith congregation worker  
1986-96 Rev. Murray James-Groom, Associate  
1991-93 Rev. Karen Hickey, Associate Minister  
1993 Dedication of new church addition, Nov. 20<sup>th</sup>  
1996-97 Kevin Fletcher, Interim Associate  
1997 Rev. Paul Taylor, Associate Minister