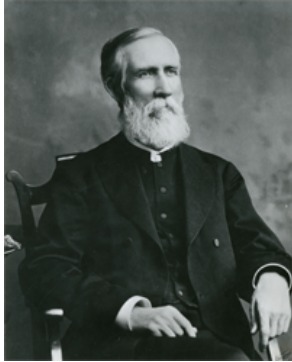


**General Assembly 2017 History Moment #1      James Robertson**

We begin with one of my biggest heroes – James Robertson.



Born in Scotland, raised in Oxford County, Ontario, educated at Knox College and then Princeton, Robertson first served the congregation in Norwich, Ontario.

Through a series of circumstances, he was called to Knox Winnipeg in 1874 and in 1881 became the Superintendent of Missions for the West (meaning Kenora, Ontario to Vancouver Island and north). During his 20 years in the role, he started churches, nurtured young clergy, recruited people into the ministry and travelled ceaselessly, all in the desire to see people become followers of Jesus.

In a letter to his wife, he recounted being on the train back to Winnipeg during a Prairie blizzard. The train had pulled into a small Saskatchewan community. The station master and train conductor came to Robertson with a story of woe. A bride and groom were waiting, in the hotel across the street from the train station, for the minister to arrive to marry them, but the blizzard had the minister storm-stayed, unable to get into town. When Robertson heard this, he asked the conductor to ensure the train did not leave until he was back onboard, and he hurried off with the station master. Having officiated at the couple's nuptials, Robertson left them to enjoy their wedding meal and night and got back on the train for Winnipeg.

Story Two: In August 1897, Robertson stood on a pier in Vancouver Harbour watching people clamouring onto ships headed to Skagway, Alaska as they joined the trek to the Klondike. Robertson understood the Church needed to be in Dawson City, but who to send? As Robertson watched, a name came to mind – Robert M. Dickey.

Robertson sent a telegram to Charles Gordon in Winnipeg, asking Gordon to sound out Dickey, a second-year theology student in Winnipeg, about Dickey's interest. While Robertson believed Dickey had the skills and personality to be the minister in Dawson, Dickey was not ordained. Arriving in Winnipeg, Robertson went to Dickey's residence room to ask if he was willing to be the minister in Dawson City. Dickey agreed. Robertson, claiming the authority of Superintendents, as outlined in the *1560 First Book of Discipline* – to respond to newly arising mission fields – ordained Dickey the next night. Within a month, Dickey was on his way to the Klondike. With breath-taking speed, Robertson had responded to a mission call.

Many Robertson stories could be told, but I cannot end without recalling a line from Robertson's letter to his daughter close to the end of his life. He wrote, "My only regret in life is this: That I have but one life to give for the Saviour who gave his life for me." Here then is the motivation that fired Robertson's mission vision ministry.

**General Assembly 2017 History Moment #2      Anna Ross**

My wife, the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries to Taiwan, when we started dating, introduced me to three older women whose paternal grandparents were George Leslie and Minnie Mackay – an extraordinary heritage. Yet no one mentioned their maternal grandparents also gave them a noteworthy heritage.



Anna Ross, their maternal grandmother, was the wife of John Ross, minister from Brucefield, Ontario, and a tireless advocate for the Covenanter expression of Presbyterianism. John Ross died unexpectedly in 1887, leaving Anna with five children under the age of 14 and a sixth on the way.

Ross moved her family to nearby Clinton where she taught school for 10 years. In 1897, she became the first superintendent (principal) of the newly established Ewart Missionary Training Home. The Ewart board knew of Ross because of her writing in the *Record* and other places. Further she was a much in-demand Bible teacher among Women's Missionary Societies, which were communities of spiritual renewal and mission vision.

Ewart's second year of existence saw 11 students, and the Ross family living in the old Ewart home – stretching it to the limit. The bigger challenge was the conflict between Ross and the superstar Old Testament professor whom Knox College had imported from Scotland – J. Edgar MacFadyen. Ewart students took their courses at Knox. In the 1899 winter term, they began asking Ross questions about what MacFadyen meant. Ross decided to attend a class and witnessed a discussion between MacFadyen and an Ewart student that left her upset. She wrote to the Ewart board to complain about MacFadyen's theological understanding of the Old Testament. In doing this she exercised great courage.

The board did not need to resolve the conflict because MacFadyen declined to teach Ewart students in the future, and Ross became principal of the Ottawa Ladies College. Following five successful years in Ottawa, during which she wrote *The Lost Covenant* – her rebuttal to McFayden – she moved to Saskatchewan to help her son homestead near Strasbourg, Saskatchewan.

[Students from Knox College came to supply the church in Strasbourg for the summer and in 1906 it was George William Mackay, son of George Leslie and Minnie, who fell in love with Ross' daughter, Jean. So that is that part of the story.]

Ross, in 1913, took up the cause of the Sikhs on the ship *Komagata Maru* which was being held in Vancouver harbour. In a strongly worded pamphlet, which was rushed to press and got wide distribution, she explained that allowing the Sikhs to land in Canada was the only appropriate answer. She urged her readers to lobby the government. To do that they needed to find a friend who would join them in writing to members of Parliament and join them in praying for the government to do the right thing. Sadly, these efforts failed to bring a just solution for the Sikhs – but the model for political action, “prayer and labours” (to use Ross' language) remains instructive.

When Ross died in 1933, the *Record* described her as “a notable figure in church life.”

**General Assembly 2017 History Moment #3****Agnes Maule Machar**

(The material in this History Moment is taken from [Ruth Compton Brouwer's biography of Machar](#) in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography.)



This is not about a Presbyterian female novelist named Lucy Maude Montgomery – the story is of Agnes Maule Machar. The daughter of John Machar, minister of St. Andrew's, Kingston and one time principal of Queen's University, Agnes was born in 1837. She was primarily educated by her father; before she was ten, she was learning Latin and Greek.

Her writing career was launched by her prize-winning novel *Katie Johnstone's cross: a Canadian tale* (Toronto, 1870). Often writing under the pseudonym Fidelis, she wrote at least eight novels, and numerous poems and essays. She collaborated on six works of popular history. The natural beauty surrounding her summer home, Ferncliff was her joy and most frequent inspiration. Generations of Canadian school-children encountered her verse in their readers.

Shifting later to adult readers in essays in the *Canadian Monthly*, Machar defended the Christian faith against the onslaughts of scientific rationalism and higher criticism. She may not have won many over, but she did win respect. In 1876 secularist William Dawson LeSueur declared that, of those who had questioned his arguments in the *Canadian Monthly* on the efficacy of prayer, Machar had given the most satisfactory response.

Machar's defense of Christianity sought to make it socially relevant, especially in terms of what a Christian society owed to the poor in the new industrial age. Privileged Christians needed to recognize the poor had a right to work, justice, and the means to rise above subsistence.

The elderly poor were a particular concern. In a paper presented to the National Council of Women of Canada in 1895, she recommended that homes be established for them, by the state if necessary, and the homes be "as little regarded as charity for the veteran in the industrial army, as is the pension of the old soldier." In the end, it was elderly women whom she would assist directly, by leaving a bequest to establish Machar House "for old ladies past earning their own livelihood." (164 Earl St., Kingston)

Machar challenged prevailing arguments that higher education would unsex women, maintaining instead it would allow women to develop their God-given talents, making them better Christians. In essays and in a resolution presented to the National Council of Women in 1896, she called for legislation to improve working conditions for women and children in shops and factories.

She was treasurer of the Kingston wing of the Presbyterian Women's Foreign Missionary Society and sat on the executives of the Local Council of Women and the national body. She served as president of the Kingston Humane Society and was a founder of the Canadian Audubon Society. During the first decade of the new century she was a founding member of the Canadian Women's Press Club and a vice-president of the Canadian Society of Authors.

Machar died in 1927. Alfred Edward Prince of Queen's University wrote she had lived a large-hearted life and died "rich in character, rich in achievement."

**General Assembly 2017 History Moment #4      The Indigenous Missionaries**

A new way of telling the mission story has arisen, a telling recognizing the role of Indigenous Christians in the adoption, adaption and proclamation of the good news of Jesus. For Canadian Presbyterians on the Canadian Prairies that means the stories of missionary heroes like James Nisbet, Hugh MacKay and Lucy Baker are incomplete without the stories of George Flett, Chief Joseph Boyer, Agnes Thomson, Jacob Bear, Suzette Blackbird...

George Flett, Metis, and an associate of James Nisbet in starting the work at Prince Albert in 1866, was not given the freedom to carry out ministry on his own. He tired of the control placed on him at Prince Albert and was allowed to move to Okanse, Manitoba in 1873. There and on the surrounding reserves he had a significant ministry for the next 22 years. Flett was ordained a minister in the PCC in 1875. Flett was an outspoken critic of the government's actions during the 1885 North-west Resistance also known as the Riel Rebellion.

John McKay, also Metis, replaced Flett at the Prince Albert Mission. Either through circumstance or Nisbet learning better management skills, McKay was given more freedom. Ordained in 1878, two years later he became the minister on the Mistawasis Reserve, where he served for 10 years. He was described as "the most eloquent of Cree preachers, and the most daring and successful of all Buffalo hunters; a combination of qualities surely worthy of enduring memory."

Other names are Jacob Bear (Cree), Donald MacVicar, Chief Joseph Boyer (Ojibway), Agnes Thomson, and Mr. Gaddie (Cree) – about whom very little is known.

During the 1870s, as a number of Dakota crossed the Medicine Line (border) into Canada, they were settled on reserves in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. The Presbyterian Church in Canada brought the American Presbyterian reverend, Solomon Tunkasuiciye (a Dakota), to minister at Birdtail in Manitoba. He had an effective ministry for 10 years before returning to his home in the Dakotas.

The first legacy Solomon left behind was a group of Dakota young men. Peter Hunter's prophetic ministry called his people to follow Jesus and challenged the actions of the Indian agent on the Dakota Tipi Reserve near Portage la Prairie. He died too young. Jason Ben, due to health issues, was limited to serving as a translator/interpreter, a role he filled well. And John Thunder would have a 30-year ministry on both Dakota and other Indigenous reserves in Manitoba.

The second legacy was understanding the gospel needs to be proclaimed in the Indigenous languages of the people. Chanske Hanska, leading elder for the Birdtail Church, wrote to The Board of Mission when the Birdtail church was seeking a successor to Solomon. Hanska, in speaking for the community of Jesus' followers at Birdtail, said, "When the Holy Spirit was given as Jesus our Saviour promised, we have been spoken [to] with lots of different languages. Therefore, we knew it from the beginning that [having the gospel] spoken with native languages was the work of the Holy Spirit." This application of the Pentecost story challenges the church to continue striving for the good news to be proclaimed in Indigenous languages.

## General Assembly 2017 History Moment #5 Gillespie and the Indian Residential Schools

This story, I hope, complicates the Indian residential school story.

Catherine (Kate) Gillespie was born in 1866 and trained as a teacher. In the mid-1880s Kate's family headed west to the Prairies. Kate joined them in 1889.

She taught at the Crowstand Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan for three years and then for four years was the teacher at the Mistawasis Reserve day school, near Prince Albert.

At Mistawasis she confronted the challenge of day school students not attending school. On bad weather days with no students attending school, Gillespie visited students in their homes teaching lessons and assigning work to be done. Gillespie found this teaching method frustrating, failing to see the significance of adapting to the patterns of the Indigenous peoples.

In 1901 Gillespie became the first woman in Canada appointed an Indian residential school principal. She was also one of the first lay people appointed a school principal. Gillespie faced gender challenges, including being paid less than her male counterparts, a situation about which she was "piqued."

Gillespie brought innovations to the curriculum, taking the entire school on two-week camping trips by the Qu'Appelle Lakes. Living out-of-doors allowed students to practice traditional skills of fire building and keeping, cooking on an open fire and living in tents.

As a residential school principal, Gillespie led worship gatherings both in the school and on nearby reserves. During her first year as principal, her letters to the Mission Administrators in Toronto contained requests for Cree hymnbooks so those gathered at the school for worship could sing in their Native language. Gillespie believed the worship and praise of Jesus Christ should be in the mother tongue of the students.

During the latter years of Gillespie's principalship, each Sunday she led worship and preached at the reserve, with one of the senior male students translating. Gillespie's knowledge of Cree was not good enough to preach in Cree. She argued that trusting her interpreters was a completely effective way of doing ministry. At Saturday supper, the senior students (Gillespie's interpreters) sat around Gillespie's dining room table to eat and talk about the preaching text for the following day. "Interpreters," Gillespie's title for those who translated from English to Cree, suggests space for creativity and agency. She recognized her words, even her meaning, would be reworked and contextualized by those who translated for her; they could be trusted to interpret the message.



I know Gillespie sounds too good to be true. Gillespie was blind to the fact that student deaths were not solely the result of students coming to school sick, for previously healthy students were exposed to life-threatening diseases at the school. Further, Gillespie never questioned the school system that put her in the role of surrogate parent. She accepted the role without asking whether it would not have been better to let Indigenous parents parent their children.

In 1908 Kate Gillespie married W. R. Motherwell, Minister of Agriculture for Saskatchewan, ending her Indian residential school career.

**General Assembly 2017 History Moment #6****John Morton**

John Morton had a successful ministry in the 1860s in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, until he developed serious throat problems, possibly diphtheria. Morton's doctor ordered rest and an extended trip to the Caribbean. Morton went to Trinidad in 1865. During the previous three decades, Trinidad's economy had fundamentally changed – the end of Black slavery caused plantation owners to turn to the Indian sub-continent for labour, offering a form of indentured servitude. Thousands of Indians took up the opportunity to make money in Trinidad over five years and then get a free trip home.

When Morton visited the island, he noticed no church group was seeking to reach the Indians on the plantations with the good news of Jesus. American Presbyterians were working among the Black population, and Christian work was being done among the Indigenous community – but no work among the Indians. When Morton returned to Nova Scotia and his congregation, he tried first to convince the Church of Scotland and then American Presbyterians to respond to the mission call. Neither responded. Thus in 1868, with the blessing of the Synod of the Maritimes, Morton and his family became missionaries to the Indian community in Trinidad.

His vision was clear. Trinidad was close to Nova Scotia with a regular trade between them; it was only natural for a Maritime church to take on this mission. Second, the mission would be education-based. The Indian labourers were expected to return to India and those who had become followers of Jesus would need the training and tools to carry the good news back to India. Which led to the third piece: the mission would be in Hindi. The missionaries would learn Hindi, because the Indian Christians, when they returned to India, would speak Hindi – teaching the Indian labourers English would not advance the spread of the gospel.

Morton became proficient in Hindi, being able to preach in Hindi and playing a lead role in creating a Hindi catechism.

The demands for schools out-stripped the number of missionaries, who turned to training Indians as teachers. This too fit the ministry model. The missionaries were not going to take the gospel to India, but instead, those they trained. The significance of the Indian teachers is evidenced in the Trinidad mission's reports to General Assembly, where the names of the Indian teachers are included as part of the mission staff (this was the only Canadian Presbyterian mission to be this clear about the partnerships formed across cultural lines). Further, the Rev. Lal Bahari, an Indian, had his reports published in the Acts & Proceedings.

Through the missionaries serving in Trinidad, Canadian Presbyterians learned about Muslims – for the indentured labourers were not just Hindus, there were also Muslims among the group.

The Trinidadian mission is an example of a mission call being heard and responded to with an intentional mission plan. Further, it highlights how a globalizing world creates unexpected mission opportunities.

**General Assembly 2017 History Moment #7****Biafra**

On May 30, 1967 (50 years ago) Biafra declared independence from Nigeria, and a civil war was underway.

A number of Canadian Presbyterian missionaries served in Nigeria, including the recently returned Walter McLean. Through the fall of 1967, McLean and E.H. Johnson were in regular contact with External Affairs (Government of Canada). In early 1968, Johnson told government officials the people of Biafra should be able to provide enough food for those in Biafra.

By the summer of 1968 the story had changed. The food crisis in Biafra was critical, it was estimated that 6,000 people, primarily children, were dying daily. The estimate was that by November 1968, the number would be 10,000 daily.

The International Red Cross was trying to get food in but was running into roadblocks on every side. The only way to get food in to Biafra was by flying it in, which was both expensive and risky, especially since it was impossible to fly in at night since Biafran leaders were not sharing the landing codes, which were necessary for night landings, with anyone. In June 1968, a Red Cross flight taking food in was shot down and the Red Cross suspended flights.

In August 1968, E.H. Johnson visited Biafra and he left on a flight that had brought food into Biafra in a daring mission. E.H. Johnson brought with him the landing codes for Uli airport. It was now possible for pilots to fly into Uli at night virtually on instruments only. With the codes in their hands, the focus of Johnson and the Presbyterian Church was to get food into Biafra, which led to the creation of Canairelief in early 1969.

Canairelief brought together Oxfam Canada, various churches, and philanthropists with high-risk thresholds – all of whom were no longer willing to wait for the Government of Canada to act.

The planes loaded with food flew straight north from the island of Sao Tome off the African coast, reaching the African coast just as dark fell. As soon as the flights reached the coast they



turned off all the lights and in the plane, except for the navigator's penlight, flying in complete darkness until the navigator told the pilot they were over Uli airport. The plane would circle the airport and then the people on the ground turned on the runway lights and the plane turned on its lights for two minutes until it landed and then all the lights were turned out. The food was quickly unloaded and the flight left again under the cover of darkness.

Canairelief had five planes (Lockheed 1049H Super Constellations) with each trying to make five to six flights a week. They were able to take in 17 tons of aid each flight. In August 1969, one of the planes crashed outside of Uli, killing the crew. They were eulogized in the Canadian press as heroes.

Biafra changed the Canadian Church and Canadians. Canada would be a player in the world of humanitarian relief, whether the government would take the lead or not.