

ZION-MEMORIAL UNITED CHURCH: OUR HISTORY

by Chris Redmond, November, 2023

Zion-Memorial United Church traces its roots to three congregations that began in the 19th century, and has experienced three major fires as well as other disasters including the ice storm of 1998 and the pandemic of 2020. Here's the story...

Soon after the earliest settlements in the Lanark County area, the first Presbyterian minister in the area arrived in 1817. Five years later another Presbyterian leader, the Rev. George Buchanan, began work in what is now Beckwith Township. His church was first on the 7th Line, and later on highway 15 at Franktown, where there is now an Ontario historical plaque in his memory.

There was a division among Presbyterians in the mid-19th century between the "Church of Scotland" and the "Free Presbyterians". In 1869 both groups built churches in Carleton Place: St. Andrew's (Church of Scotland) was located on William Street, and the Free Church, which was given the name Zion, was at the corner of Albert and Beckwith Streets. Zion drew many of its members from an already existing Free Presbyterian church at Blacks Corners (9th Line of Beckwith).

St. Andrew's built a new larger church on Bridge Street in 1887. Zion had to rebuild on its Albert Street site after the great fire of Carleton Place, on May 20, 1910, which demolished most of the downtown area in a single night. The two Presbyterian churches remained separate, just a block apart, even after the two branches of Presbyterianism reunited on the national level in 1875 to form the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The third congregation that helped give rise to Zion-Memorial was a Methodist group led by the Rev. John Black, who came to the "Mississippi Circuit" in 1829. They built a wooden church in 1831 on Bridge Street near Townline Road, and in 1871 replaced it with a brick one (the building that now serves as Carleton Place Baptist Church).

As the Methodist congregation grew, plans were made for a new location, with a large church built in 1888 on Franklin Street between

Beckwith and Judson Streets — the property that is now occupied by Zion-Memorial. At that time there were houses on the opposite side of Franklin Street, but a park was created there after the 1910 fire. The Cenotaph or war memorial that sits in the park was erected after World War I.

In the early years of the 20th century, Canada's population was growing rapidly, especially in the west, and there was a shortage of clergy. In 1913 the Methodist congregation could not get a fully-trained minister and ended up hiring a student from Ireland, John Christie, who ministered successfully for about a year. But when World War I began, he left to serve with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and was killed at Vimy Ridge in 1917.

The Methodist church did not have a full-time minister again until 1919. During the winter of 1918, several of the Protestant churches in Carleton Place worshipped together in the Town Hall auditorium as a way of saving fuel during the wartime austerity.

To help deal with Canada's rapid growth and the need for churches across the country, Canada's Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists, along with a scattering of "local union churches", negotiated a merger. They became the United Church of Canada on June 10, 1925, although about a third of Presbyterian congregations had voted not to take part. A smaller denomination, the Evangelical United Brethren, became part of the United Church in 1968.

When the 1925 union became official, the Methodist church on Franklin Street took the name "Memorial Park United Church", and Zion Presbyterian became Zion United Church. A majority at St. Andrew's Presbyterian also voted to join the United Church, but after negotiations it was agreed that the minority at both St. Andrew's and Zion who wanted to remain Presbyterian could do so and could purchase the St. Andrew's building for their use. Many of the members of St. Andrew's who had favoured the United Church began attending Memorial Park United. With the growth of the congregation, a new church hall was built in 1939.

The Zion United Church building was destroyed by fire in January 1950, but rebuilt on the same site. Four years later, in February 1954, a devastating fire at Memorial Park United destroyed everything but

the bell tower and steeple, and by the following year the building was reconstructed in the form that is still visible today. A small wing with offices and modern washrooms, as well as an elevator, was added to the building in 2006.

At the time of the 1954 fire, Memorial Park had discussed a possible merger with Zion United, but the idea was turned down. A decade later it was considered again, and this time a merger was approved and a new name created that refers to both parent congregations. Zion-Memorial United Church came into existence July 1, 1966.

Worship services were held in the Franklin Street building, while the Zion building on Albert Street was used as the church's Christian education centre until 1977. It was then sold for commercial use. In 1988, with the help of the building's new owner, the Zion cornerstone from 1910 was moved to Zion-Memorial and built into a cairn that stands near the front doors on Franklin Street.

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church closed in 2018, and a few of its members joined Zion-Memorial. The St. Andrew's building on Bridge Street is now owned by the All Nations Church.

For a time Zion-Memorial was part of a three-point pastoral charge, with the same minister looking after St. Paul's United Church in Franktown and Boyds United Church in Boyds Settlement, as well as the Carleton Place church. St. Paul's is now closed, and Boyds United is no longer connected to Zion-Memorial.

From 1925 to 2018, Zion-Memorial was part of the Bay of Quinte Conference of the United Church. Conferences were divided into Presbyteries, and for much of that time Zion-Memorial was part of Renfrew Presbytery. From 2012 to 2018 it was included in Four Rivers Presbytery. As of 2019, with the change to a new structure for the entire United Church, Zion-Memorial is a "community of faith" in the Eastern Ontario Outaouais Region, which includes eastern Ontario, the Ottawa region, and portions of Québec.

Many of the past ministers of the Methodist church and Memorial Park United, Zion Presbyterian and Zion United, and Zion-Memorial United are remembered in portraits that hang on the front wall of the narthex (front lobby).