

Post-Union: 1925-1945

The creation of the United Church of Canada in 1925, and the resultant shrinkage of the remaining Presbyterian Church, had a mixed effect on the church buildings of these now two distinct denominations. In Manitoba, the great majority of Presbyterian and all the Methodist congregations went into union. Only two Presbyterian congregations in Winnipeg retained their church buildings: Kildonan Presbyterian and Calvin Presbyterian, the latter whom have since rebuilt their church. Those Presbyterians in Winnipeg who chose to opt out, organized themselves into several congregations. They built four churches. The principal of these was First Presbyterian, Winnipeg; a stone church, designed by the architects Pratt & Ross in a refined Gothic manner, opened in 1927 [Figure 32].

The other three new Presbyterian churches were Norwood Presbyterian, Winnipeg (1927), St. James Presbyterian, Winnipeg (1928) and St. John's Presbyterian, Winnipeg (1928). The striking feature about these new Presbyterian churches was in their interior arrangements; all signalled a turning away from the auditorium seating plan, a reaction against the dominant stage effects of the pulpit platform, and a return to the traditional nave with its straight rows of pews. First Presbyterian even went so far as to sprout transepts; and St. John's flourished an English-style beamed ceiling and a divided chancel.

In Brandon, the Presbyterians regrouped and commissioned Shillinglaw to design his fresh-looking First Presbyterian, Brandon (1927-28). And at Portage la Prairie, the continuing Presbyterians erected First Presbyterian, Portage la Prairie (1927); a church of most peculiar design, with its squat entrance tower topped by a pyramidal spire and windows sporting ogee arches.

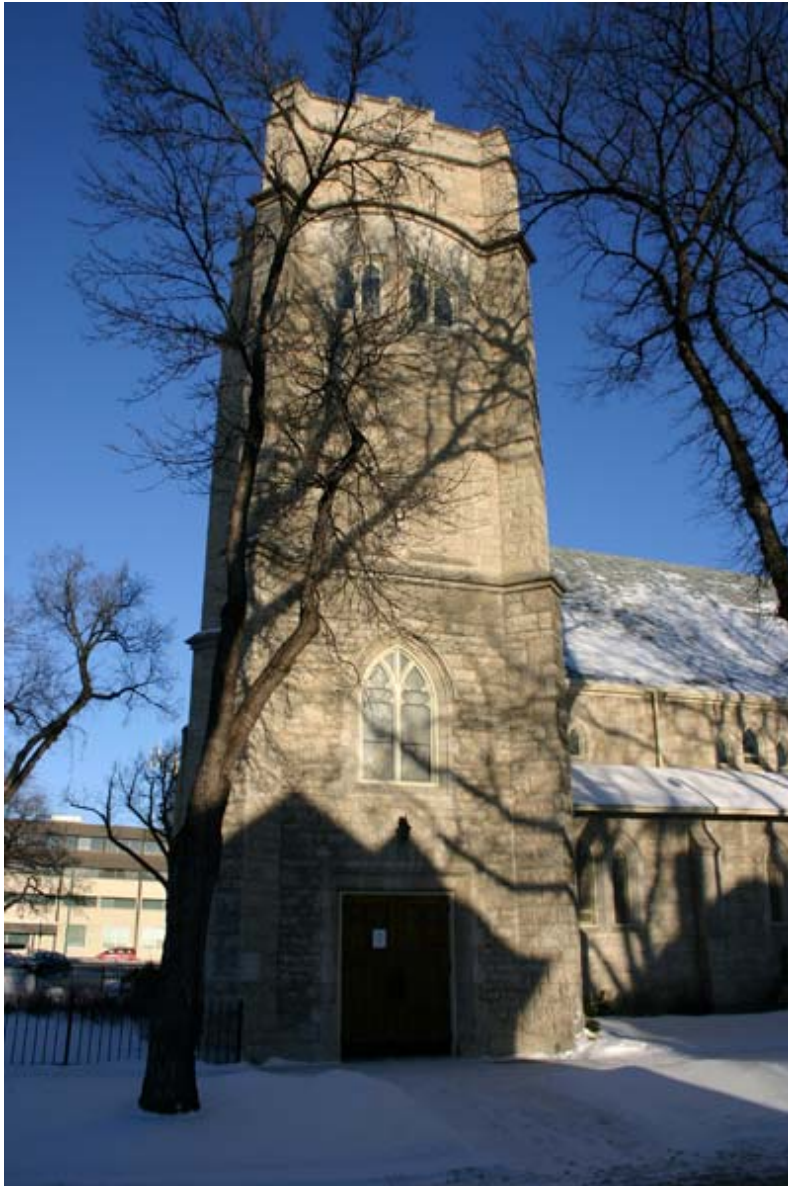


Figure 32.
First Presbyterian, 1927, by Pratt & Ross.

Following Union, there was a spate of new United Church buildings in Winnipeg. None of these church buildings, however, approached anything in size and architectural quality to those Methodist and Presbyterian churches that had been erected before the War. Only Gordon-King Memorial United, Winnipeg, completed in 1927, came close with its great brick massing. The scale of the newly-built United churches were now more modest, as with Edgar Prain's pretty Tudor Gothic John Black Memorial United, Winnipeg of 1927. As with the new Presbyterian buildings, the interior arrangements of the new United churches were conscious of their new role: less theatre, more community worship. As Claris Edwin Silcox wrote in 1933:

The very process of the fusion itself, although instinct with superlative difficulties, has released certain raw energies of a spiritual character, and has led to an eagerness for experiment, a liberality in temper, an open-mindedness to new forms of service, new types of architecture, new responses to religious suggestion.

In the towns of Manitoba, and especially in the rural areas, consolidation of Methodist and Presbyterian congregations solved the problem of too many church buildings, but spelt the abandonment of those church properties no longer required. Many church buildings were left to weather into decay. Others found new uses. For example, Minnedosa Methodist, an early brick building from 1884, found itself a Masonic Hall. (In 1963 it was returned to its original use when bought by the Calvary Church.) Hartney Methodist (1890) became the hall for the new 1928 Hartney United. But service clubs, community centres and farm buildings were the most common reincarnations for most of these old buildings.

The depression of the 1930s halted the spree of post-union church construction. The Presbyterians struggled on to maintain the few churches they had retained, and even managed to erect simple, new buildings, such as MacBeth Presbyterian, East Selkirk (1931-32), by the efforts of their faithful and hardworking members.

There were few new United church buildings raised during 1930s. The larger urban centres can claim no distinctive church buildings from this decade. And when county churches did appear, they were, on the whole, architectural reworkings of earlier successes. Eriksdale United (1936), one of the best of the period, is a wood frame, rectangular box, entered by a large corner tower, and dominated by a large Gothic end-window; a popular design even before the turn of the century.

One of the last of the period, built on the eve of the Second World War, was Union Point United (1939) [Figure 33]. It stands peaceably alongside Highway 75, near Morris, in the autumn surrounded by the coloured fields of ripened grain. The church is no longer used for services, and its interior has been cleared of all its furnishings. Its appearance is almost dateless: a rectangular wooden box, gable roof, a neat rooftop steeple, little pointed windows along the side walls, and a large end-window dominated by a bursting rosette. Travellers stop to admire Union Point United; and some leave thank-you notes stuffed under the inside windowsills, in gratitude of the tranquil moment the little chapel has given them.



Figure 33.
Union Point United, 1939.

Modern: 1945 - The Present

The Second World War extended the period of reduced church construction. When building did commence, however, members of the United and Presbyterian Churches in Manitoba found themselves caught up in the throes of two seemingly unrelated discussions: the liturgical question in theology and the new face of architecture. When it came to new church buildings, however, these topics merged.

The mood of experimentation which Silcox had experienced in the 1930s gained rapid ground following 1945. The Liturgical Movement explored new forms of worship and the changing role of laity to clergy. As a result, the service was made a less formal occasion; the minister often acting more as moderator than as a foreman, and with members of the congregation making a greater contribution. How then, it was asked, could the designers of new church buildings interpret this new sense of spiritual freedom?

Architects like Moody & Moore responded with such superb ecclesiastical works as St. Andrew's River Heights United, Winnipeg (1946-50). As architecture, it is very much a transitional piece: a melding of the traditional with the modern. In plan and form, the church harkens back to the earliest examples of Roman Christian architecture: a long nave, low side aisles with sloping roofs, an extending chancel apse, rows of clerestory windows, and a beautiful cross-beam ceiling.

But St. Andrew's River Heights throws a highly visible nod to the stylistic currents of the Modern Movement. Clear, sharp angles are to be seen everywhere; none of those pointed Gothic windows here, but rather the cool flatness of rectangular and square openings. Unadorned posts rather than ornate columns. And instead of banks of choir stalls and the intimidating central pulpit, there are discreetly placed choir pews on either side of the chancel and a pulpit to one side.

Winnipeg was the first locale in Manitoba to feel the effects of modern forms of church architecture. The new rural churches built after the War tended to be extensions of the vernacular churches nearby. Westminster United, Foxwarren, for example, was constructed in 1951 and proudly displays a crenellated entrance tower and modified Tudor-style windows. Similarly, when the 1928 Pine Falls United structure burned down in the late 1950s, the congregation obviously felt the neo-Tudor image of the original fully met their needs, and proceeded to build a picturesque replica.

As the Modern Movement became firmly entrenched, however, historical associations disappeared. Just as the simple rectangular box with a tower or steeple once dominated Manitoba church architecture, so its modern offspring, the now ubiquitous A-frame, began to appear in the 1950s. This architectural form, with its steeply pitched roofs that often slip down almost to the ground, have become synonymous with church buildings, although not with any particular Christian denomination. The United and Presbyterian Churches have erected many variations of the A-frame type, from the double-jointed roof of Dominion City United (1963) to the sleek silhouette of Westwood Presbyterian, Winnipeg (1964, Pratt-Lindgren & Associates).

It was during this period that Northern Manitoba came to play an increasingly important role in the province's development. Presbyterian, but especially United churches appear in all of the sizeable northern communities. Moreover, the United Church concentrated much of its efforts upon providing newer church buildings for Native Indians. Usually, these churches were of the standard rectangular box type, gable-roofed, and either crowned by a shining metallic steeple- as with Cross Lake United (1957) - or marked by an entrance tower- as with Poplar River (1947). These northern structures are easily identifiable as being in the historical stream of Manitoba's ecclesiastical tradition.

Falling enrolment in the United and Presbyterian Churches has also been a fact of the modern period. For a great many of the older church buildings, the result has been all too obvious. In a few fortunate cases, the buildings have found new uses. But the usual fate of the redundant church is closure, abandonment and destruction. Often there appears no other solution.

There is, however, much latitude for optimism. The current renaissance in the appreciation of Canada's heritage has led Manitobans on the whole to a greater respect of their architectural inheritance. While in the past certain United and Presbyterian congregations undertook unsympathetic changes, or worse, the demolition of their historic churches, this retrogressive trend has now considerably weakened. Many members of Manitoba's United and Presbyterian Churches, like the congregation of Westminster United, Winnipeg, are now painstakingly doing all within their power to retain the architectural integrity of their historic church buildings.