

The Baptist Church in Colonsay 1812 – 2012

Brief histories by
John McNeill
Eleanor McNeill

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to mark the bi-centenary
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A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

This being the bi-centenary of the Baptist Church in Colonsay, it seems appropriate to mark the occasion. It is hoped that this modest volume will be of interest to present and future generations as a record of Christian endeavour. The work comprises two separate histories, written at an interval of one hundred years.

Mrs. Eleanor McNeill of Machrins has most kindly made available her copy of *The Baptist Church in Colonsay* by John McNeill, first published at Edinburgh in 1914. This publication is nowadays very hard to find, and it is apparently not possessed by the National Library of Scotland. Part of the information was incorporated in the *History of the Baptists in Scotland* from pre-reformation times, edited by Rev. George Yuille and published at Glasgow by the Baptist Union Publications Committee in 1926. The latter work is extremely helpful for the general reader; the third chapter, entitled *The New Dawn and Rise of "Scotch" Baptists*, covers the period from the Commonwealth until 1800 and is a useful introduction to John McNeill's own publication.

Interested persons should also read *The Scottish Highlands – The Churches and Gaelic Culture* by Donald E. Meek and *The Baptists in Scotland – A History* edited by D W Bebbington. Incidentally, John McNeill was a brother of the famous Dr. Roger McNeill of Colonsay, whose contribution to epidemiology and preventative medicine is without parallel in the Highlands. The text of this history has been transcribed verbatim, with one or two additional notes being clearly indicated.

The second history is entitled *Colonsay Baptist Church Update – The Open Door* and is by Eleanor McNeill, a current and long-standing member of the congregation.

An important modern background resource is entitled *The Search for a Common Identity – The Origins of the Baptist Union of Scotland 1800 – 1870* by Brian R. Talbot. For neighbouring islands, see *Sunshine and Shadow – The Story of the Baptists of Mull and Island Harvest – A History of Tiree Baptist Church 1838 – 1988*, both by Prof. Donald E. Meek.

The publishers of the present work wish to acknowledge the kind support of all members, adherents and friends of Colonsay Baptist Church, whose advance subscriptions and generous enthusiasm have made this publication possible. Particular thanks are due to Shirley Johnston for her photographic contribution.

FOREWORD

It gives me a great deal of pleasure to pen a short introduction to this historical account of the life and activity of the Baptist Church on the island of Colonsay over the past two hundred years.

Over the past thirty eight years our family have greatly benefitted from all that the island offers in general, and from the friendship of the folks within the Baptist Church in particular. Regular visits to the island have become and will remain a very important part of our lives. Humanly speaking, it is amazing that this church continues to exist at all. That worship continues on a regular basis, within the small church, is no doubt due to the faithfulness of a few, but godly folks, folks who are no doubt known and loved by many of you reading this book.

At a personal level, I have had the privilege of conducting and sharing in a good number of weddings, funerals and dedication services over these past years. The island church has also allowed me to bring various groups of people to the manse from the different churches and social work settings within which I have been involved. The welcome has always been warm and open.

In more recent years we have witnessed and enjoyed the coming together of the Church of Scotland and the Baptist Church for worship, Sunday by Sunday. What others have spent years discussing and talking about, has been put into practice on the island, for the benefit of both islanders and holiday makers.

I hope you enjoy, not just reading this book, but also that you may have opportunities of participating in the ongoing life of the church on Colonsay.

Bob Gemmell

The Baptist Church in Colonsay

by
John McNeill

In reading Mr. Waugh's pamphlet giving an account of the progress of the Baptist Home Mission in the Highlands and Western Islands of Scotland, it struck me that it would be interesting to the younger generation of Colonsay to have some account of the progress of the Church in the island.

I have, therefore, in the following short sketch, tried to give a few of the events in connection with the Church, from the time of the landing of the first missionary to the present day [c.1910 – editor.] Some of the facts happened within my own recollection, and others I have gleaned from older members of the community.

About the year 1812 the Rev. Dugald Sinclair made a tour through a part of the Highlands and Western Islands, and after coming as far north as Tiree joined with Malcolm Maclaren (a member of the Independent Church), and the two came over to Colonsay in a small sailing boat. They were well received by the people, and a number of meetings were held in different parts of the island. These were productive of much good, many being brought to believe in the Saviour.

After a stay of some days they left again in a small sailing boat for Islay, but before reaching the point of Rhu Vaal the wind had risen so much that they were compelled to turn back. Again they tried, but again failed. Three times, indeed, did they try, but were always driven back. This circumstance so impressed Mr. Sinclair at the time that he believed the Lord had need for him in Colonsay.

The following year the two returned to the island, when their labours were greatly blessed, many conversions taking place. One sermon, preached by Mr. Sinclair, so impressed the people that it has been handed down from generation to generation; many times did the writer afterwards hear his uncle speak of it in admiration. The text of the discourse was Acts xxviii.22: "But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest; for as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against." Preaching Baptism by immersion from it - which was something quite new to the people and which no one had thought of - he made a deep and lasting impression upon their hearts. They began to search the Scriptures daily upon this point, for the people of Colonsay were very much like the Athenians and strangers of old we are told of in Acts xvii.21, who spent their time in nothing else but to tell or hear something new.

John McMillan, son of Angus McMillan, butler to the laird, spoke to Mr. Sinclair, afterwards asking to be baptized, and one after another came forward until there were eight of them. These were all baptized on the following Sunday in Loch Fada. McMillan was a fine young fellow, and afterwards went through College. He was placed as a missionary in

Inverary. But after only a few years' ministering to the people he died, on 10th April 1820 (sic), at the early age of twenty-seven. His illness was only of a few days' duration.

Another of the eight, Neil McEachern, was desirous of becoming a missionary, but feeling his education deficient he determined to go to Mull, where there was a better teacher, to improve himself for the work. Taking advantage of a small boat which was leaving for Mull at the time, he embarked with four others, but alas! they were destined never to reach the other side. While still a long way from land, the weather became so tempestuous that the boat became unmanageable. It eventually filled and sank and all on board were drowned.

The following year [c. 1814? - editor], when Mr. Sinclair came round again, he brought with him a young man from the Ross of Mull, Duncan Fergusson, to be baptized. In those days the Church was very careful in selecting its members, and after a consultation it was decided that the young man would not be baptized that year. Mrs. McVane, a member of the Church, spoke, saying that they made her wonder, as he was a promising young man: Why not baptize him now, for how did they know he would be alive next year? They agreed to baptize him there and then. This was the first Baptist of the Ross, and he afterwards went to Edinburgh to fit himself for missionary work. He was sent home to spread the Gospel among the people of his own district, where he laboured hard for forty years.

After a good many years, during which he paid his annual visit to our island, Mr. Sinclair left this country altogether and went to America, where he continued preaching the Gospel.

Mr. Sinclair, who was a cultured man, was one who bore the heat and burden of the day. In his time travelling facilities in the Highlands were not what they are nowadays, so that the traveller very often had to undergo many hardships. Much opposition and prejudice had also to be met and overcome. The lairds of some of the places visited by our missionaries were not at all in favour of these visits, as the following incident will show.

When Mr Sinclair was addressing an open-air meeting in a certain place, the laird sent his factor with the following message, which was uttered at the pitch of the factor's voice: - "Any person who attends this man's meetings, or listens to his preaching, shall lose all his lands."

On hearing this, and knowing that the laird's word was law, Mr. Sinclair's congregation began to move off one by one. Mr. Sinclair made a short pause here, and then said: "I am sorry that the factor has caused such a disturbance, and also to see so many turning away from hearing the Word of Life, and choosing rather the profit of this world; but if I should resort to the law of the land I could place him (the factor) within four walls of stone and lime (meaning prison)." On hearing this the factor returned to the laird and said: "You and the minister can pull each other's noses if you choose, but I am not the man to disturb his meeting again."

Another incident is related, which reveals the tact with which this venerable missionary dealt with his opponents.

On visiting the island of Coll on one occasion Mr. Sinclair announced that he would preach

on the Sabbath morning. Just before the service began the laird sent his factor to tell Mr. Sinclair that he was not to preach on his island on any account. To this Mr. Sinclair replied: "Well, sir, I have already intimated the meeting, and as I am not in the habit of telling lies I am bound to preach. But you had better return to your master and tell him that directly after the service I will call and have dinner with him, and no doubt we shall agree between ourselves about the meetings." The factor returned home and on meeting the laird delivered Mr. Sinclair's message as above recorded. Dinner was prepared accordingly, and Mr. Sinclair, true to his promise, called upon the laird. So well did they get on together that after the dinner the laird turned to Mr. Sinclair and said: "You are at liberty to hold as many meetings on the island as you yourself see proper."

The two daughters of the laird of Colonsay were converted and became a great help to the cause in the island, bringing out the people to the meetings and in various other ways. At the time of their conversion the laird and his lady were on a visit to Edinburgh. On their return one of the islanders, an unconverted sinner, thinking no doubt to do injury to the truly Christian inhabitants, told the laird of his daughters' conversion, and how they were visiting the poor people at their cottages and persuading them to go to the meetings. He was allowed to finish his story without interruption, but listened to impatiently, I fear, judging from the reply he got. Raising his stick in a threatening attitude, the laird said: "The first who dares say anything against my daughters again will get this stick across the head." One of the ladies was baptized in Edinburgh, and the other in Loch Sgoltaire by Mr. Grant, minister for many years at Tobermory.

Although the laird objected to anyone speaking to him about the conversion of his daughters, he was, at the same time, greatly annoyed over the matter; so much so, indeed, that he caused a number of those that he thought instrumental in their conversion to leave the island. This he could easily do by refusing them any kind of employment. As showing the spirit in which the laird's action was accepted, one of those who had to leave the island - Donald Currie - left singing the Paraphrase: "I'm not ashamed to own my Lord."

Among those who had to go was the writer's uncle - Malcolm McNeill - one of the first in the island to be baptized. He went over to Islay, but at the end of two years he was recalled by the laird and made manager of Oronsay, a post which he retained till the laird's death, twenty years afterwards. The laird found him such a faithful and upright servant - one who practised what he preached - that his ideas regarding the Baptists and their creed became considerably modified; and not his only, but his wife' well, who began to entertain a great regard for Malcolm, asking him to pray for herself and her husband.

Malcolm, better known as "Calum Ruadh" [i.e. red-haired - editor], was one of the leaders of the Church, and was continually crossing over to the meetings at Kilchattan, a distance of some six miles. [Meetings at the time were held at the school, then owned by SSPCK - editor.] One can easily understand the many difficulties he had to encounter in getting across the strand owing to the tide. Sometimes he had to leave before daylight, and as often getting back in the dark, frequently having to wade, carrying his boots over his shoulders. He was often accompanied on these journeys by his wife, and for fear the tide might cut them off they often dispensed with breakfast, taking with them a piece of bread and butter to be eaten at their leisure on the other side.

Captain McNeill, son of the laird, was staying at Oronsay at this time. He was married to an English lady who appears to have been very much impressed with Malcolm's piety. One Sunday when he could not get over the strand, she invited him to hold a meeting in her house. Calling all her servants together she sat with them and listened throughout the service, although not understanding a single word of what was said.

At this time [1830's?] the Baptist Church in Colonsay was prospering and greatly increasing in membership. This was due in a large measure to the labours of one gifted man, Malcolm Blue, a native of the island and a true follower of Christ, but still an unbeliever in the matter of immersion. He had preached against it in Mull, but afterwards becoming convinced that he had been altogether wrong in his views, he made a point of going to Mull (the very place where he had spoken against it) to be baptized.

Blue was regarded by those who had the privilege of listening to his discourses as a splendid preacher; he therefore generally undertook the expounding of the Gospel, while Malcolm McNeill prayed and read and also conducted the singing. Malcolm, however, had only three tunes at his command, "Martyrdom", "Coleshill" and "Stroudwater", and these had to do duty on every occasion. Now, however correctly Malcolm might sing as regards time, Blue was sure to be a note ahead. This did not worry Malcolm much, but he was rather surprised one day when they were walking home from the meeting together to hear his friend say: "You were singing too quick to-day." This evidently annoyed Malcolm, for he replied: "If I was twice as quick, you would be sure to be before me"

"Wonderful are the ways of the Lord" in bringing people to repentance, as is shown by the conversion of one young man, Duncan McDougall by name, a native of Mull, then engaged at the kelp-making in Oronsay. When passing the cross one day he remarked to his companion, looking at the figure carved on it, which represents the Crucifixion: "I suppose that will be Donald Balloch", meaning thereby a man of ill-repute in local tradition. ["Poxed Donald", the Campbell factor who was executed c. 1646 by Angus MacCholla - editor]. His conscience at once rebuked him, as he knew quite well who was represented in the carving, and repenting of his past life he became a changed man and was baptized into the Church. He afterwards went to be trained for missionary work, and settling in Tiree he visited this island frequently, where he did much good, baptizing many. He found time as well to compose a great number of beautiful hymns, which are still sung all over the Highlands. [Duncan MacDougald, a native of Ross of Mull, settled in Tiree in 1824 as a Gaelic school teacher and became the first Baptist Pastor in that island, serving for 31 years. He died in 1881. His hymns were published by J. Niven, Glasgow, in 1841, as "Gaelic Hymns" - editor].

Angus McNaughton, missionary in Islay, came over occasionally to help in the good work. After his retirement his place was taken by James Miller, who was for over twenty years in Islay, visiting Colonsay twice a year at least, and on one occasion bringing Mr. Livingstone of Lismore with him. Livingstone preached a very powerful sermon from Rev. xxi. 25, which was long afterwards remembered. [McNaughton farmed in the north of Islay, travelled barefoot between meetings, for speed, and was the first Baptist Pastor in Islay. Mr. Miller was based in Bowmore, but his work embraced Port Charlotte and Port Ellen - editor.]

In the year 1843 Mr Tulloch (late of Edinburgh), accompanied by Mr. McQuarrie, paid us his first visit, holding several meetings throughout the island. One powerful discourse given by Mr. Tulloch, from Romans viii. 13, is still remembered by some of those who heard it. Shortly after him came Mr. Macintyre of Mull. [Rev. William Tulloch was Superintendent of the Home Mission, a charismatic and highly respected evangelist; his father was William Tulloch (1776-1861), author of Sketch of Itinerant Exertions in the Highlands, 1819, reprinted 1901. Duncan MacIntyre served at Bunessan (1835-63) - editor]

The family of Lachlan McNeill, Kilchattan, are deserving of some mention. Lachlan had three sons, and one of them named John, not finding scope for his energies at home, went off to Canada. The accounts of the country which he sent home were so encouraging that the whole family followed him in a couple of years, taking one or two more of the islanders with them. This was in the year 1852, and was a great blow to the Church, as nine members left the island together. John was the father of the Rev. John McNeill, the present Baptist minister at Toronto, who was present at the Congress in London in 1905, when he preached in Spurgeon's Tabernacle. Before returning to Canada he visited Colonsay.

Donald, another of Lachlan's sons, was a splendid young man, and before leaving the island had worked hard for the Church, preaching and holding meetings on his own account. After being some years in Canada he determined to devote the remainder of his life to missionary work, going to college to better fit himself for that purpose. He was known among his friends as the "Minister mor", owing to his great height, standing 6 feet 5 inches. Alexander, the third son, was also a good Christian and an able preacher, although not devoting the whole of his time to the preaching of the Gospel. [The 1851 Census, 30th March, shows Lachlan McNeill aged 65, a widower, farming 12 acres of arable in Kilchattan, by far the largest croft (most being 2 or 4 acres in extent). His unmarried children were with him, Donald (27yrs), Sarah (22yrs) and Isabella (19yrs). The only other resident was Malcolm Blue, 66yrs, an unmarried visitor described as "Baptist local preacher". In 1841, Lachlan was described as a Shoe Maker, and his sons Alexander (then 20 yrs) and John (evidently Donald's twin) were still at home, whilst "Sarah" was still known by her Gaelic name of "Marron" - editor].

Malcolm Blue was now getting on in years and still able to preach, but beginning to fail very much. One Sabbath in May 1858, he gave a very impressive discourse from 1 John iii. 1,2 in the Schoolhouse, Kilchattan, which greatly affected the people. This proved to be the last sermon they were to hear from him, for he took ill that night and died a few days afterwards. A good man, highly respected by everyone, and one who had done much to further the cause of Christ, his death came as a great blow to the island. [His gravestone reads: "In memory of Malcolm Blue who died 29th May 1858 aged 73 years. He acted as Baptist missionary in Colonsay for many years. His sister, Flora Blue, who died 30th May 1879, aged 80 years. "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God; therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not." In loving memory of Christina McNeill nee Blue, who died 19th December 1934, in her 91st year. "I know that my Redeemer liveth" - editor]

For a time after Blue's death the Church rather languished, and although his lifelong friend Malcolm McNeill continued to hold the meetings, the latter was not so able as hitherto for

the work, his years telling against him. The meetings were held alternately at the inn and at the schoolhouse, Kilchattan, on the other side of the island, but they began to be less well attended, as a minister had recently been appointed to the Parish Church and people went to worship there instead.

About this time we had a visit from Duncan Campbell, who many years afterwards was settled in Islay. He was instrumental in bringing a number of people forward to be baptized. Mr. McFadyen also arrived from Tiree, and being a splendid preacher he did much good in arousing the people to a sense of their duty. He afterwards went over to Islay to help Mr. Miller, who was beginning to fail, and remained there for two years, visiting this island frequently, but finally leaving our shores for America.

On the occasion of the first visit to Islay of Mr. McFarlane, Baptist minister of Tiree, shortly before coming to Colonsay, the writer happened to be at Port Askaig at the time of his arrival, but did not know him any more than the Islay natives did. Many remarks were passed as to who the new arrival could be, one saying that he looked like a Government official, while another said he was not a gentleman anyway when he did not offer to treat them at the hotel. Whatever the Islay folk may have thought of him, he became much liked by the Colonsay people, and his preaching drew crowds to the meetings. The writer heard one man remark that these two preachers, McFadyen and McFarlane, were spoiling the people of Colonsay, as they did not value another that did not come up to their standard.

Malcolm McNeill, about the last of the original band of workers left, was now getting very frail and not able any longer to go to the different meeting-places. The people, therefore, arranged to meet at his house every alternate Sunday, where, sitting in his chair, he read and expounded the Gospel. This was continued until the time of his death in 1873 in his eighty-fifth year. [In the 1871 census, he was living (as a widower, "retired herd") in the modern farmhouse at Balerominmore (7 windows), and sharing his home with Malcolm McNeill, 37 yrs, ploughman, John McNeill, 28 yrs, herd, Christina McNeill, 19 yrs, housekeeper and Peter Campbell, 16 yrs, farm servant. His son's gravestone reads: "In loving memory of Malcolm MacNeill, farmer, Baleraominmore, who died 10th November 1906. "Carraig, mo neirt, mo thearmunn is e Dia". - editor].

After [Malcom McNeill] his death [1873] interest in the meetings began to decline until they were finally dropped, except when a missionary happened to come round. Fortunately this state of matters did not last long, for when Mr. McFarlane came again there was a great revival, the interest being kept up by Mr. Tulloch and Mr. Allan McDougall coming over at different times.

The Church had now greatly increased in membership and it was determined to build a suitable meeting-house. A site being acquired from the laird the work was at once proceeded with. Those who could not give money gave their time and labour. A handsome and commodious building erected to seat over 100 persons and costing £300 was opened in 1879 free of debt.

Not having a resident minister, Mr. James Campbell, Kilchattan, who had entered heart and soul into the work of the Church, undertook to conduct the services when there was no

missionary on the island.

Ever since the church was built, however, we have had a number of missionaries paying us occasional visits. Among the first was Mr. McLean, the present pastor of the Baptist Church at Dalkeith, who was followed by the Rev. Donald McMillan, a native of the island. He stayed with us a few months [c. 1882?] and afterwards went out to the Congo, where he died shortly after his arrival. [Donald MacMillan seems to have been the son of Alexander MacMillan, a rabbit catcher, who lived with his wife and six children in the cottage beside Cnoc Eabriginn, and he was born c. 1859 - editor.]

Then in the following year came the late Mr Henderson, afterwards Baptist minister at Irvine, followed by Mr. Bell of Tobermory. In 1886 we had the Rev. James Black, who remained with us for about three months. Although not a Gaelic speaker his personal influence was very great. He worked hard during his stay, visiting the people in their homes. He held a Bible Class during the week, and on Sundays the people flocked to hear him.

In 1891 Mr. McDougall was sent to us, but he had to devote half his time to Islay, a month in one island and a month in the other, or fortnightly, as suited him best. Mr. Campbell, in his absence, took the service. Mr. McDougall's first visit to Colonsay was in 1869, when he went to Islay in the place of Mr. Miller, who had retired through old age.

We have had visits at various times since from Mr. Brown of Buessan, who is now in Taynuilt, Mr. McArthur of Tiree, Mr. McDonald, at present in Buessan, and Mr. Milne of Cambuslang.

Mr. McDougall's services not being required in Islay latterly, he was able to devote the whole of his energies to the work here. He was a native of Mull and one of Spurgeon's students. A good preacher and an interesting man, he worked hard for the good of the island. He taught a singing class and left some beautiful singers behind him. In the Gaelic Bible Class he earnestly taught the younger people. Five were converted, two being baptized by Mr. McDougall, and the others by Mr. Brown of Taynuilt. Shortly before this time, Mr. Brackenridge, a very fine preacher, visited the island. His labours were greatly blessed and he was the means of these five girls making open confession.

Mr. McDougall resigned his charge and left Colonsay in 1907. The people subscribed for a presentation, and before his departure a crowded meeting was held in the Baptist Church on 18th December, a large proportion of the people of the island being present. Mr. Carmichael, the parish minister, presided, and spoke very highly of Mr. McDougall, expressing his regret at his departure from the island. Many others spoke to the same effect.

In January 1908, shortly after Mr. McDougall left us, a severe gale swept over the island, which caused considerable damage to our little church. Lord Strathcona very kindly came to our aid and gave us £10; Lady Strathcona also contributed £5 and the Hon. Mrs. Howard other £5. With a little further effort on the part of the members, the church was again soon set in repair.

Since Mr. McDougall's retiral, the church has been without a settled pastor, but an arrangement was made by the Baptist Home Mission, under which Mr. McDonald, the pastor of Bunessan church, visits Colonsay once a month except during the summer months. Mr. McDonald is a powerful preacher, and invariably has large attendances at his meetings on each of his visits. Mr. William Taylor, one of the students from Dunoon, has been coming here for the last two summers for a period of three months. He is an earnest preacher, a promising young man and working hard in the island. He left Colonsay for Tiree in September last year and returned to Colonsay on 3rd December and stayed until the end of January, when he held meetings every night during his stay, which was greatly blessed, seven professing conversion during that time.

Two years ago we had a visit from Mr. Grant Robinson and Mr. Cornish, who together held very interesting meetings. During the past summer Mr. and Mrs. Maisie from Central Africa gave us an account of the good work going on there, which the people enjoyed very much.

At the present time our membership is twenty-seven. Some of our members are now scattered over the country - in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Greenock, Oban, Islay, Mull and some in Canada. Our youngest member is nineteen years of age, and our oldest member - Mrs. Martin - completed her hundredth year last October. [The Martin family of Gortain moved eventually to Homefield, which had been a Campbell home; an archive of various family papers survives (wills, tenancy agreements etc.) - editor]

When the Church was first formed, a silver-mounted cup costing thirty shillings was bought for use at the Communion table and is still in use.

Although the Church work is carried on at a disadvantage, through not having a permanently settled pastor, we can truly say that the Lord has not failed to bless the work, or to raise up witnesses to the Gospel.

Since writing the foregoing, we regret to record the death of our oldest member, Mrs. Martin, who passed away [21 April 1910 - editor] at the advanced age of one hundred years.

In October 1910 we had a brief visit from Mr. Brown of Taynuilt, when he baptized a young man and a girl, who were also received into fellowship.

Colonsay Baptist Church Update:
The Open Door
by
Eleanor McNeill

The next period in the life of the church unfortunately does not appear to have been documented. The information given here is an attempt to fill the gap in the count of the next hundred years in the unique situation of the little Church.

Around the late 1920s we know that the house now known as the Baptist Manse was built by Lord Strathcona. It was designed by an architect friend, John Paul. It is quite an unusual building, quite out of character with island housing, and at the time it was the cause of considerable comment - as indeed it is today!

It was initially built to provide a retirement home for Flora Buie's husband, the Rev. Donald MacDonald of Tiree, who had for some time been living in Avenue Cottage, but he died before the building was completed and it was then rented to the Baptist congregation for use as a Manse. It was occupied then for a while by Rev. E Spence - who later returned to the Island for a second period.

From 1930 to 1939 Rev. Hector Meek [Hector MacDonald Meek, 1906-1984] was the minister. From conversations with those who were in membership at that time he was very popular and became well-known on the island. He afterwards spent time in Islay and Tiree - but his son, Professor Donald Meek, tells us that he really loved this island and its people and held Colonsay in the warmest possible affection until his death. Indeed plans are currently afoot [spring 2013] for Donald Meek to pay a visit to the Island which was so dear to his father.

By 1947 the house was being sub-let to the Education Authority for a second teacher for the school for a short period, and a missionary - Miss MacArthur, who lodged with the Martin family - was taking care of the church. After her departure from the Island the Rev. Edward Spence came once more to live in the Manse with his wife (this was his second period of ministry on the Island and he served the church for a second time there) and there were two services held on a Sunday, a well-attended Sunday School, and a mid-week meeting. These mid week meetings were mostly held in the homes of members and adherents.

A small portable pedal organ had been acquired, and this was taken round the houses. The 'musical vocabulary' had long since moved on from the three standard tunes of previous years and the hymns from "Redemption Songs" and "Sankey's Songs and Solos" had taken over. By this time the membership was in the teens, with fewer people living on the Island.

Mr. Spence's ministry was followed by that of Rev. Robert Sandford, who maintained these meetings, and also had a weekly 'teenage night' in the Manse. A few of the young folk were challenged during his ministry - though not all of them remained on the Island. During his time on the Island a very skilled carpenter friend of his in Glasgow designed and built a small pulpit for the church to replace the table and book rest which had been used until then. This pulpit is still in use today.

In 1955 Mr. Sandford received a call to Denny church and later emigrated to Canada where he died some years ago. Following his departure it was decided that Colonsay would no longer have a full-time minister. This came as a blow to those who were then in membership - numbering around 14 elderly people and one teenager, Eleanor Ogilvie, who had been baptised during her time in Edinburgh in 1952 and joined the church on her return to live on the Island.

Among those in membership of the church at that time were the Campbell, Martin, McNeill, McDougall, McFadyen and McMillan families.

Such was the affection in which the church was held by the islanders that a number were heard to say that it was 'awful' that the Baptist Church was 'closing its doors'. However, this proved not to be the case, as it was decided that the Manse could be used during the summer season to provide holiday accommodation to ministers, in return for their taking the Sunday services and the 'open door' remained firmly in place.

The first minister to take rise to the situation was Rev. D. P. McCallum in 1957, who at that time was minister at Granton, Edinburgh. Donald returned to the Island in 1959 to officiate at the wedding of Eleanor Ogilvie and Alasdair McNeill. The news soon spread, and others became interested.

During the winter period the church was served by ministers from Islay on a fortnightly basis - the Sunday School continued, and members occasionally had a small evening service. The evening service was well-attended, normally with a good number of young people who came to the service and then gathered in various groups on the Island. The church then - and now - is often described as being a 'homely' building - but at that time the evening service was only made possible by some of the members being prepared to arrive early, and light the paraffin lamps and heaters in order to make the building comfortable. Nowadays we have moved with the times and have electricity for both lighting and heating. I am sure there is still some nostalgia on the Island with the thoughts of those evening gatherings.

One particular winter evening the congregation gathered - and, with the wind howling around the building, the church was warm and cosy. During the singing of one of the rousing hymns in use at that time a member of the congregation spotted a little mouse sitting on the front of one of the boots worn by an elderly member, who was completely

unaware of what was happening; as the singing diminished to be replaced with laughter!
No one remembers how the mouse escaped!!!

Then, as a bolt from the blue, in 1975 came a letter from the landlord stating that the Estate wished to sell the Manse, and was therefore terminating the tenancy. This meant that we would no longer have accommodation to offer visiting preachers, and members were stunned. Once again it became obvious that the Baptist Church was held in affectionate esteem by the Islanders, who were quick to offer their support in whatever form they could.

In the end, a telephone call to Rev. Andrew MacRae, at that time superintendent of the Union, brought support, and after discussion it was announced that the Union were prepared to put in an offer for the house. This was carried out successfully, and with grateful thanks to God and to the Union, the work was allowed to continue. Once again the door remained 'open'!

Initially these arrangements for visiting ministers were made by the Baptist Union in Glasgow, and later taken over by the church in Oban. In 1995 the church decided to suggest to Church House that it may be better if these arrangements were made locally, where advice about visiting the Island, and questions regarding the church, the manse, and facilities on the island could be more readily answered. It was agreed that this be put in place for an initial period of two years, when the situation would be reviewed. The revised arrangement is still in place at the time of writing.

A real boost to the church culminated in four island people being baptised in Loch Fada in August 1958. The ministry of Rev. Tom Lannigan, on his monthly visit from Islay, had borne fruit, and Alasdair McNeill had decided to seek baptism and membership. This was not an easy decision, as the church has no built-in baptistry and all local baptisms take place in Loch Fada. As Tom Lannigan had moved to Cumnock it was agreed that he would conduct this baptism during his holiday visit to the Manse in August of that year. The news caused a great deal of interest on the Island, and the service was arranged for an early evening weekday.

Just two hours before the service was due to commence Tom announced that another three young people on the Island, Finlay and Catrina McFadyen, and Catrina's sister Flora (Foelalie) McNeill had expressed their desire to be baptised along with Alasdair. Arrangements were quickly put in hand, and a good number of islanders gathered around the loch - courtesy of the McDougall family whose croft was used for access. It was indeed a memorable occasion as, in this beautiful setting bathed in early evening sunshine, those who had come along joined in the singing of 'I'm not ashamed to own my Lord' and one by one the four young people were baptised.

The atmosphere round the loch may have proved to be too much for one young man who had passed the scene. One of his friends met him cycling furiously towards his house, and

when asked if he was not going to stay and watch the proceedings was given the reply "No, I don't want to see God!".

James Ogilvie, who had for years assisted by providing the organ music for the church, assisted the candidates in and out of the loch. Then they were taken by Landrover the short distance to the church where they changed clothes, following which tea was provided to the congregation, and at a short communion service all four were received into membership. Few on the Island had witnessed a baptismal service in the open air before, and the courage of the four candidates made a huge impression on those attending. Indeed this event became front page news in the Baptist Times!

Soon Colonsay became a popular spot for holidaying ministers - and many have preached in the church over the years, some of them also coming during the winter to conduct a monthly service. Among those ministers who became regular holiday visitors were the late George Young, George Hardie, Edward Campbell, J.J. Johnston, Archie McColl, Archie Bathgate, Peter Barber, Andrew MacRae, Cecil Bradley, Bob Gemmell, Alex Rodger and many others. Indeed, with a quick look back into the mists of time, over fifty names can be brought to mind of those who have visited the island under this scheme. To them all the church owes a great deal of gratitude.

With the membership dwindling - mostly due to death - another memorable occasion was the baptism of Ena (McDougall) Williams, daughter of the church secretary. Ena was baptised on the mainland, but joined the church on her return to live on the Island. She later served as church secretary for a number of years - a task which her mother had performed faithfully. Then in the 1970s the Campbell family arrived and Irene, who had attended the Tabernacle in Glasgow, was baptised in Loch Fada by Pastor Arthur Williams, who had travelled to the Island to carry out this baptism - yet another memorable occasion.

In the late 1990s two local people who had attended the church for a number of years, Netta Titterton and Betty Galbraith, requested membership. Due to age and disability outdoor baptism was not possible - but their applications were welcomed, and both joined on 'profession of faith'.

A number of gradual changes took place over the years. With the older children having to leave the Island on reaching Secondary School age, and a number of them then settling on the mainland, it meant there were fewer young folk on the Island. As a result attendance at the evening service became virtually nil. Where once young people had gone to the evening service then met up with their friends, and with the arrival of television on the Island, it was eventually decided to stop the evening service. During this period the Sunday School was linked with the local parish church, held in the Church of Scotland with members of each church being involved. Eventually this arrangement proved to be no longer practical and the Sunday School was discontinued.

In 1999 it was agreed that there should be a further attempt made to do work among the children, and after discussion it was decided to form an 'After School Club' - later known as Colonsay Children's Club. Due to its proximity to the primary school the club was held in the Baptist Church, and run by members of both churches. Every Thursday afternoon, from September until Easter, the children came in straight from school where refreshments were provided, games played, Bible stories told and choruses taught. The co-operation of Kevin Byrne who drove the school bus and willingly altered his time table to accommodate the club was much appreciated. Easter heralded the end of the year for the club, and culminated with the children taking part in a joint service, and receiving prizes for their attendance. Sadly with fewer children on the island, and illness and family commitments among the leaders, the club was abandoned in 2005.

In 1995 the church decided to approach Rev. Alex Rodger, who frequently visited both summer and winter, to become the 'Overseer' of the work on Colonsay. Apart from visiting the Island regularly this meant that he could also represent the church at meetings in Glasgow. Alex accepted this position, in which he still continues, and again a great deal of gratitude goes to Alex and Joan for giving of their time in this way.

In 2000 building work at the church meant that water and toilet facilities were provided. More recently work has been carried out in the church building making the floor and the platform sound, and further work on the vestry and toilet - along with the outside painting of the building - was undertaken in spring 2009. In all these ventures members owe a debt of gratitude to friends from the mainland who come and give of their time and labour to carry out such works.

During this period both island churches suffered declining membership, which was especially noticeable in the winter months when inclement weather made it difficult for the older folks to venture out. With the Church of Scotland in a similar position, it was decided in 2001 to seek consultation with them regarding the possibility of having joint services during the winter months, while a similar consultation had taken place on the mainland between the Rev. Peter Barber, Superintendent of the Baptist Union of Scotland and the Moderator of Argyll Presbytery. With their agreement a meeting between members of both churches was arranged.

Timing of services, and arrangements to deal with the financial side were agreed and the joint services commenced in October 2001, lasting until June 2002 when, with congregations swelled by the influx of visitors to the Island during the summer months, each church then held its own services. By 2003 with positive feedback from members it was agreed to continue joint services throughout the year, and this has resulted in favourable comments from islanders and visitors alike. With congregations swelled by summer visitors

the work continues - and despite smaller congregations and often inclement weather every effort is made to hold a once monthly service in each church the winter

It should be placed on record that the Manse has not been used solely for visiting preachers. Over the years it has been our privilege to have groups from the Elpis Centre, in Glasgow, the Bethany Christian Centre in Leith and Gogarburn hospital in West Lothian, along with their carers and helpers. For a few days those folk enjoyed a break on the Island - some never having been on an island before - though others had travelled widely. In Colonsay they had the benefit of being in a smaller family type group, and also of visiting the homes of members. Indeed some of the group members became well known on the Island - meeting people when out walking, going to Ceilidhs etc. Hopefully in a small way they experienced something of God's love during their visits, and also marvelled at the beauty of creation.

In the church there have been many memorable occasions over the years. There was the weekend visit of the Scottish Baptist choir, who sang on the Saturday evening, and took part in the Sunday service. The Argyll Baptist Federation has also been on the Island for an annual 'Family Weekend', enjoying a ceilidh on the Saturday and joining us for the Sunday service. These events have given the folk here the opportunity - mostly denied due to isolation - of worshipping in a larger group, and meeting new friends.

Locally too, the church has been used in recent years for weddings, child blessing and dedication services, and funeral services - each one with its own particular importance for the small community.

The most poignant memory of all must be the visit of the Rev. Peter Barber (former General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Scotland), together with his family shortly before his death. For many years the family had holidayed on the Island, and now Peter, though very frail - decided to visit the island once more. Despite failing health his first wish on arriving was to see Kiloran Bay! On the Sunday, with family members conducting the service, Peter sat on a chair on the platform and spoke briefly on the text 'For me to live is Christ - to die is gain'. Many of the congregation were visibly moved by his sincerity and courage. This was to be the last time that he was able to speak in public - a fact which was mentioned by Rev. D. P. McCallum at his memorial service in Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh, one of Scotland's largest Baptist churches. From one of the smallest Baptist churches in Scotland to one of the largest - this was an example of the love Peter had for all the churches, no matter how big or small.

Recently Peter Barber's successor at the Baptist Union, Rev. W. Slack, visited the Island and suggested that the outside walls of the building could benefit from being painted. He offered to approach the Union to see if they would be willing to help - and they offered to supply the paint. Soon Alex Rodger was arranging a work party - and despite various difficulties being encountered, reducing the number in the party to four, over a period of

five days they had not only painted the church, but had modernised the toilet - and tiled the walls!

With its 'facelift' the church now looks great and fits in well with the school next door, and the surrounding houses. A great example of Christian love in action - and the caring of the larger Baptist family. With our grateful thanks ringing in their ears, the work party boarded the ferry, heading for home and a well-earned rest. Our thanks go too, to members of the community who gave advice, lent tools etc and worked to help clear the overgrown grass etc. from the area around the building.

Recently we have been delighted to see young Caitlin McNeill - currently studying music with the University of the Highlands and Islands - willingly come along while she is on the Island to play the organ for us, and in this she is following in the footsteps of both her great-grandfather James Ogilvie and her grandmother Eleanor McNeill.

Now, in the year 2012, although we have an ageing membership and have learned that due to failing health Alex Rodger will have to stand down as 'Overseer' of the church, plans are afoot to celebrate 200 years of witness on the Island in 2013.

Will the door remain 'Open'?? Looking back one can only thank God that despite changes all around the church has continued to be used to witness in the community. 'I do not know what lies ahead' says one of the hymns in our Mission Praise books - but equally we can only echo the words of the chorus of that hymn:

We know Who holds the future,
And He'll guide us with His hand;
With God things don't just happen.
Everything by Him is planned.

So, in accepting the words above, we must remain faithful. The Colonsay church may be unique in Scotland in that, not having a resident minister/leader for over 50 years, the door has remained open - the work and witness has continued in unusual circumstances - and we can only look forward in the hope that future generations will rise up to continue the work and that the door will remain 'open'.

Eleanor McNeill,
Colonsay, 2012.

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