

## The Garden Distressed: Church Union and Dissent on Prince Edward Island, 1925

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JAMES CAMERON

## The Garden Distressed: Church Union and Dissent on Prince Edward Island, 1925

IN THE MID-1920S PRINCE EDWARD ISLANDERS vigorously debated the proposal to establish a new national Protestant church. The movement to merge Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists into a new United Church of Canada produced intense conflict on the Island. Although it was ultimately successful, the process was probably more fractious in P.E.I. than in other parts of Canada, and even produced a minor constitutional crisis in Dominion-Provincial relations. Initially, the appeal of ecumenical ideology, the influence of clergy, and the promise of a solution to the problem of declining church memberships created by out-migration generated widespread support among Island Methodists and Presbyterians. But resistance intensified as church union loomed on the horizon. A tiny cadre of dedicated anti-unionist ministers, aided by Presbyterian friends in high places, aroused loyalty to the threatened Presbyterian heritage and campaigned under the potent banner of religious freedom. This opposition was reinforced by the close-knit, traditional and largely rural nature of Island society; strong ties to the past, absorption in community affairs and a strong regionalism rooted in Maritime economic underdevelopment, all tended to undermine the appeal of a new Canadian national church.

As studies of 20th-century Maritime Protestantism are rare,<sup>1</sup> reflection on the church union of 1925 on P.E.I. is highly warranted, and helps correct the preoccupation with the land question and the politics of Confederation which have dominated island historiography. Most studies devoted to the church union of 1925 have been national in their focus and pro-church union in their sympathies.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 George Rawlyk, "Fundamentalism, Modernism and the Maritime Baptists in the 1920s and 1930s", *Acadiensis*, XVII, 1 (Autumn 1987), pp. 4-33. Two examples of this rare type are Rawlyk's article cited here and Ernest Forbes, "Prohibition and the Social Gospel in Nova Scotia", *Acadiensis* I, 1 (Autumn 1971), pp. 11-36. Even studies of 20th-century Island history remain scarce. Several historians have underscored this: J.M. Bumsted, "'The Only Island There Is': The Writing of Prince Edward Island History", in Verner Smithers, David Milne, and Satadal Dasgupta, eds., *The Garden Transformed: Prince Edward Island, 1945-1980* (Charlottetown, 1982), p. 31, and Ian Ross Robertson, "Historical Writing on Prince Edward Island Since 1975", *Acadiensis*, XVIII, 1 (Autumn 1988), pp. 57-183. Until recently, historians have been preoccupied with the pre-Confederation period and such central issues as the land question and the Island's dogged but finally unsuccessful resistance to Confederation.
- 2 Keith Clifford's historiographical essay, "The Interpreters of the United Church of Canada", *Church History* (1977), pp. 203-14 is still a valuable introduction to the historical literature on church union (1925) in Canada. Major studies include C.E. Silcox, *Church Union in Canada: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York, 1933), J.W. Grant, *The Canadian Experience of Church*

James Cameron, "The Garden Distressed: Church Union and Dissent on Prince Edward Island, 1925", *Acadiensis*, XXI, 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 108-131.

Developments in and contributions from the regions, such as the Maritimes, have largely been ignored.<sup>3</sup> Where such studies have noted the Maritime response, they have frequently appealed to the conservative stereotype to explain regional resistance to union.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Maritime case studies of church union are needed to supplement the national perspective and to reveal regional variations on the union theme.

Presbyterianism has been significant in the religious development of the Maritimes as a whole, but especially so in the Island province: since before Confederation and up to 1925 it has accounted for nearly 30 per cent of the population, almost twice the denomination's national proportion in 1921. Methodism has also been significant, for in the same census year the denomination comprised about 13 per cent of all Islanders. Together, Presbyterians and Methodists composed 42 per cent of the population and 76 per cent of Protestants.<sup>5</sup> Hence, when the church union controversy peaked in 1924-5 it involved a substantial segment of the Island populace.

The church union movement on P.E.I. rendered the Island a "garden distressed". The Protestant religious landscape was significantly rearranged. The new United Church of Canada emerged as the most powerful player among Island Protestants and a champion of social uplift; Methodism had vanished and Presbyterianism was reduced to less than one-half its former strength. While a new religious solidarity was formed in some communities, others were racked by bitterness and strife. Disunity between United and Presbyterian congregations was compounded by major disputes over church property and denominational continuity with the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Yet the era of ecclesiastical strife produced some good. Both sides, perhaps unintentionally, articulated legitimate principles and concerns: dissidents showed reverence for the faith of their fathers, defended religious pluralism and championed religious freedom; unionists, on the other hand, held high the ideal of Christian unity, tried to adjust religious traditions to changing historical circumstances, and attempted to promote further stability and harmony in Island society by strengthening a basic moral and religious consensus.

*Union* (London, 1967), Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada 1904-1939* (Vancouver, 1985), Burkhard Kiesekamp, "Community and Faith: The Intellectual and Ideological Bases of the Church Union Movement in Victorian Canada", Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1974, and John Arthur Ross, "Regionalism, Nationalism and Social Gospel Support in the Ecumenical Movement of Canadian Presbyterianism", Ph.D. thesis, McMaster University, 1973.

- 3 Most of the regional work done on the union of 1925 remains unpublished: Twila Buttmer, "Great Expectations: The Maritime Methodist Church and Church Union 1925", M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1980, John R. Cameron, "The Story of Church Union of 1925 in the Presbytery of Pictou", B.D. thesis, Presbyterian College, Montreal, 1969, and Kenneth Gunn-Walberg, "The Church Union Movement in Manitoba, 1902-1925", Ph.D. thesis, University of Guelph, 1972. Ross' thesis, while not a regional study, gives close attention to Western regionalism.
- 4 See Silcox, *Church Union in Canada*, p. 296. Ernest Forbes has noted the pervasiveness of the Maritimes' conservative stereotype and so far has laboured the hardest to refute it in *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1989).
- 5 *Census of Canada, 1921*, I, p. 578.

Church Union was consummated in 1925 but the religious affair had begun much earlier. Island Presbyterians and Methodists,<sup>6</sup> along with their counterparts elsewhere in Canada, had gradually overcome the earlier denominational legacy of fragmentation through successive mergers in the last half of the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> Two streams of Island Methodists merged in 1884 when the final and largest consolidation of Methodists produced the national Methodist Church in Canada.<sup>8</sup> Hence, when Island Methodists entered the 20th century as part of the Methodist Church in Canada, they accounted for about 11,400 of the Island population. The Island section of the New Brunswick and P.E.I. Conference was divided into the Summerside and Charlottetown districts, which reported a total of 69 preaching stations.<sup>9</sup> In organization and strength, Island Methodists changed little over the next two decades up to the union of 1925. Several streams of Island Presbyterians also eventually merged into one dominant church in 1875 to form a small segment of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.<sup>10</sup> When the century closed, there were about 30,750 Presbyterians on P.E.I. with around 73 churches organized into one presbytery.

These 19th-century denominational consolidations created a church union legacy which, to some extent, facilitated the subsequent union initiative. The arrangements required to effect the earlier unions — such as interchurch negotiations, the exchange of fraternal delegates at national denominational meetings, the formation and work of joint union committees, and the development of bases of union — bequeathed to the denominations a heritage of unionist thought, experience and religious diplomacy.

A significant convergence in social and theological outlook also strengthened the foundation for a later union between the two denominations. Mid-19th-century anti-Catholicism promoted solidarity and was a factor in the united Protestant front which opposed Roman Catholic campaigns to acquire a government endowment for St. Dunstan's College and to establish a publicly funded separate school system.<sup>11</sup> And several Island religious newspapers laboured to generate broad Protestant support for the Young Men's Christian Association, the Lord's Day Alliance and temperance organizations.<sup>12</sup> These 19th-century efforts at social uplift extended into

6 Since Congregationalists were few on P.E.I., this article examines Presbyterian and Methodist developments exclusively.

7 Grant, *The Canadian Experience*, p. 9 and John Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Don Mills, Ont., 1974), p. 137 have argued that "indigenization" and Confederation promoted the trend to unification.

8 See J.W. Caldwell, "The Unification of Methodism in Canada", *The Bulletin*, 16 (1967), pp. 3-61.

9 *The Methodist Yearbook* (1900), pp. 41-4.

10 J.T. MacNeill, *The Presbyterian Church in Canada 1875-1925* (Toronto, 1925), ch. 2.

11 Ian Ross Robertson, "Religion, Politics, and Education in Prince Edward Island, from 1856-1877", M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1968, parts II-VI.

12 See the *Protector and Christian Witness*, 1857-8, its successor the *Protestant and Evangelical Witness*, 1859-65, and the *Presbyterian and Evangelical Protestant Union*, 1875-85, Public Archives of Prince Edward Island [PAPEI].

the 20th century and were supplemented by new cooperative reform projects.<sup>13</sup>

Important theological changes among Methodists and Presbyterians tended to reduce differences between them. Methodist piety during the latter half of the 19th century, and indeed up to 1925, was gradually transformed. Dramatic conversions and the experience of individual holiness were increasingly eclipsed by spiritual nurture and an emphasis on the practice of holiness, especially through social reform activities.<sup>14</sup> The social reform impulse was also strong among the dominant Free Church tradition of Canadian Presbyterianism.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, the evangelicalism among Methodists and Presbyterians in the late 19th century was being tempered by a liberalism which stressed practical Christianity at the expense of orthodoxy.<sup>16</sup>

Representatives of both the older orthodoxy and the new shades of liberalism<sup>17</sup> were concerned with the moral and spiritual health of the nation. Confederation and the subsequent formation of national denominations stimulated the desire among many church leaders to serve and shape what they believed were the spiritual and moral needs of the young, expanding country. Keith Clifford claims that a vision of Canada as "His Dominion" provided the "inner dynamic" of Protestantism in the first decades of the 20th century and also formed the basis of "a broad Protestant consensus and coalition".<sup>18</sup> And Burkhard Kieseckamp has shown how the Protestant consensus was also buttressed by a new view of community that was no longer content with an existing unity based on the believer's spiritual union with God, but instead coveted an organic union which was external and visibly

13 George Emery, "The Origins of Canadian Methodist Involvement in the Social Gospel Movement", *The Bulletin*, 26 (1977), pp. 106-10, and Brian Fraser, *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada 1875-1915* (Waterloo, 1988).

14 See Phylis Airhart, "The Eclipse of Revivalist Spirituality: The Transformation of Canadian Methodist Piety, 1884-1925", Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1985.

15 Moir, in *Enduring Witness*, p. 144 has maintained that the post-1875 church became dominated by the attitudes and the interests of the Free Church tradition of Canadian Presbyterianism.

16 The presence of these trends among Protestants in the Maritimes has been shown by Forbes, "Prohibition and the Social Gospel", Arthur Betts, *Pine Hill Divinity Hall, 1820-1970: A History* (Truro, N.S., 1970), p. 31, John Reid, *Mount Allison University, A History to 1963*, vol. I (Toronto, 1984), pp. 193, 225, 227, 271 and II, pp. 55 and 58, and Rawlyk, "Fundamentalism, Modernism", pp. 5, 18, and 29. See also the *Presbyterian Witness*, 19 October 1907 and the *Wesleyan*, 23 September 1908, 4 July 1923, and 1 April 1925.

17 The conventional terms "liberal", "conservative", and "orthodox", used especially since the First World War to identify theological emphases, will have to be revised as our knowledge of the intellectual ferment becomes more refined. See Michael Gauvreau, "War, Culture and the Problem of Religious Certainty: Methodist and Presbyterian Church Colleges, 1914-1930", *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society*, XXIX, 1 (April 1987), pp. 12-31. He argues that a "Church Realist" position was developed in the Methodist and Presbyterian church colleges which was neither liberal nor conservative. Instead it was "a distinctive Canadian evangelical response to the intellectual perplexities of the modern age..." (p. 26).

18 Keith Clifford, "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis", *Studies in Religion*, 2 (1973), p. 24. Mary Vipond has also investigated the role nationalism played in the formation of the United Church of Canada in "Canadian National Consciousness and the Formation of the United Church of Canada", *The Bulletin*, 24 (1975), pp. 5-27. Fraser in *The Social Uplifters* likewise affirms the presence among Presbyterian leaders of the desire to Christianize Canada.

confirmed.<sup>19</sup> Thus practical Christianity, preoccupations with reform, nationalism and a new concept of community illustrated a significant degree of convergence in theological and social views among late-19th and early-20th-century Methodists and Presbyterians.

Although historians have examined these theological and social changes mostly among national denominational leaders, such shifts in beliefs and approaches were equally important to the Island situation. The newly emerging denominational ethos among Methodists and Presbyterians was partly responsible for initiating and sustaining the union movement that deeply affected Island churches in the early 1900s. And even though liberalism seemed to have few bold Island Methodist or Presbyterian champions, the presence of the new theology in the seminaries made it inevitable that Island ministers would carry some of its emphases to their pulpits.<sup>20</sup> The growing concern for social reform among Island clerics was surely one liberal influence; so was the willingness of most ministers to subordinate their denominational loyalties and identities in order to work for church union.<sup>21</sup>

The church union movement, which began early in the 20th century, encountered on P.E.I. a society whose population had been consistently declining due to out-migration. It was reduced from a 19th-century high of 109,078 in 1881 to a low of 88,038 in 1931. The cohesiveness of the province's relatively egalitarian rural communities was engendered and maintained by ties of kinship, ethnicity, religion, education, recreation and mutual aid.<sup>22</sup> Social stability helped to preserve traditional loyalties to religion, ethnic roots and empire. Because of geography and modest resources, the remarkable changes occurring elsewhere in Canada, such as immigration and population growth, industrialization and urbanization, and consequent social, ethical, and intellectual fragmentation, temporarily bypassed the Island and, at least in contrast to the larger urban centres and the west, rendered it a "garden reposed".<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, most Islanders shared in a localist perspective which was formed and reinforced by agriculture and the rural isolation imposed by

19 Kieseckamp, "Community and Faith", *passim*.

20 Many Island Presbyterian ministers received their seminary training at Pine Hill in Halifax. Douglas Campbell has shown that this theological school was an important means for spreading the unionist viewpoint. See "A group, a network and the winning of church union in Canada: a case study in leadership", *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1988), p. 45.

21 Clifford writes that "Liberalism...tended to dissolve doctrinal particularity and to relativize the organizational principles of religious institutions". See *Resistance*, p. 17.

22 Commentators have drawn attention to the pervasive sense of community and close interdependence: David Weale, "No Scope for the Imagination", *Island Magazine*, 3 (1986), p. 3, and Gary Webster, "Cooperation, Co-operatives and Credit Unions: Their Place in Island History", Harry Baglole, ed., in *Exploring Island History: A Guide to the Historical Sources of Prince Edward Island* (Belfast, P.E.I., 1977), p. 176.

23 These national changes have been charted in Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada 1891-1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto, 1974) and John H. Thompson and Allen Seager, *Canada, 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto, 1985). An attempt to describe the contours of Island society in the early 20th century and to show that, in contrast to much of the rest of Canada, it was a "Garden Reposed" is made in James Cameron, "The Garden Distressed: Church Union and Dissent on Prince Edward Island 1904-1947", Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, 1989.

the rudimentary state of Island transportation and communication. As well, there was a heightened sense of regional identity and grievance in the 1920s as a result of demographic, economic and political decline.<sup>24</sup> Island society was thereby somewhat inimical to the nationalist sentiment which undergirded the unionists' push for a national United Church.<sup>25</sup>

Serious consideration of church union did not occur on the Island until after the two denominations had begun negotiations at the national level in 1902 and had formed in 1904 a Joint Committee on Union composed of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist representatives.<sup>26</sup> The Joint Committee was required to formulate a theological consensus statement, called a Basis of Union, on which the denominations could unite. On the Island, as well as at the Maritime Synod and Conference levels, there was clear and strong support among ministers of both denominations for the proposed union. Both the Summerside District Session of the Methodist Church and the Island Presbytery passed enthusiastic resolutions which eulogized the idea of union.<sup>27</sup>

But after the Joint Union Committee in 1908 completed the Basis of Union, an examination of it by the Island Presbytery revealed both the extent and the limits of support for union among Island Presbyterian ministers. Although most clerics in 1907 and 1908 registered enthusiastic agreement with the document, a respected stalwart of the presbytery and minister of the Kirk of St. James in Charlottetown, T.F. Fullerton, emerged as an implacable opponent. Indeed, he went on to valiantly lead the minority group of clerical dissenters until his death in 1921. He favoured not the status quo, but a federation of denominations which would coordinate their efforts in selected areas and yet retain their distinct identities. Presbyterian proponents of such a scheme, perhaps inspired by the recently formed American Federal Council of Churches, remained a minority.

The Presbyterian General Assembly, which met in Halifax in 1910, approved the Basis of Union prepared by the Joint Union Committee, as did 50 of the 70 presbyteries across the country. In the Island presbytery a motion by Fullerton to disapprove of the Basis of Union was defeated 41 to 7.<sup>28</sup> The Methodist General Council, meanwhile, had also approved of the completed Basis of Union and had sent it down to its regional Conferences for a decision. At their annual meeting in 1911 the New Brunswick and P.E.I. Conference considered the Basis and voted overwhelmingly in favour of it.<sup>29</sup> Then in 1912 both denominations submitted the question of union to their members.<sup>30</sup> Like their ministers, and probably in

24 See E.R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement 1919-1927* (Montreal/Kingston, 1979).

25 Mary Vipond, in "Canadian National Consciousness", has drawn attention to this religious expression of Canadian nationalism.

26 Clifford traces the initiative and the controversy surrounding it in *Resistance*, pp. 13-25.

27 Summerside District Session Minutes (1904), p. 30, and P.E.I. Presbytery Minutes, 5 March 1907, pp. 93-4, Maritime Conference Archives of the United Church of Canada [MCA].

28 Presbytery Minutes, 1 November 1910, MCA.

29 Minutes of the New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island Methodist Conference, pp. 610-1, MCA.

30 In *Resistance*, p. 57, Clifford makes the important comment that of the three union votes held in the Presbyterian Church this was the least politicized as there was little vigorous organization and

deference to the decision of their church courts, Island Methodists strongly supported the idea: 3,393 out of 3,655 voters favoured it.<sup>31</sup> The Presbyterians lacked the same degree of union enthusiasm, but still registered strong support. On the Island 5,430 approved of union and 1,202 opposed it.<sup>32</sup> Since unionist sentiment appeared widespread in Canada, the General Assembly decided to press on with union negotiations in the hope that Presbyterian unanimity would eventually be achieved. Support may have been substantial in 1912 because the reality of union appeared theoretical and distant. Moreover, there was a lack of significant organized opposition and lay people remained poorly informed of its implications.

In 1915 a majority report of the national Presbyterian Union Committee convinced the Church to take yet another vote on union. Again, Island Presbyterian opinion seemed favourable, almost as much as it had been in 1912: membership support for union had only slipped from 81 to 76 per cent. Overall, 5,192 desired union and 1,238 opposed it.<sup>33</sup> But this result contrasted with the national voting trend. Opponents of union were beginning to reap the dissent that they had sown, in spite of a surge of war-inspired nationalism which probably tended to bridge divisions in the population. Negative votes Canada-wide increased notably from 64,925 in 1912 to 83,491.<sup>34</sup>

In spite of escalating national resistance the General Assembly in 1916 determined to push ahead with union. But dissidents refused to let their opposition die, and a convocation to form a new resistance organization, called the Presbyterian Church Association, met in October 1916 in Toronto and announced its pledge to preserve the Presbyterian Church in Canada. The secretary of the organization called on Fullerton to lead the association's Island division. Another Islander was also involved in a leadership position: the first national president of the organization in 1916 was Principal Daniel Fraser of Presbyterian College in Montreal — a rare example of a Presbyterian divinity professor who rejected union.<sup>35</sup> While Fraser clearly opposed the scheme, his article entitled "Recent Church Movements in Canada", which appeared in the *Harvard Theological Review* in 1915, showed that he did support increased cooperation among the churches.<sup>36</sup> Although president of the new anti-unionist organization, he was to play a largely symbolic and marginal role within it.<sup>37</sup> But as a member of the national Presbyterian Union Committee from 1917, he would aggressively persist in opposing union both there and in the General Assembly. Along with his brother,

propaganda among either the unionists or the nonconcurrents.

31 Minutes of the New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island Methodist Conference, 1912, p. 108, MCA.

32 Presbytery Minutes, 23 April 1912, MCA.

33 Presbytery Minutes, 1 February 1916, MCA.

34 Clifford, *Resistance*, p. 79.

35 Campbell, "The winning of church union in Canada", p. 55. This article also highlights the importance of the Maritimes for the leadership of the unionist movement.

36 Daniel Fraser, "Recent Church Movements in Canada", *Harvard Theological Review*, 8 (1915), pp. 363-78.

37 Clifford, *Resistance*, p. 123.



Rev. Dr. John Keir Fraser, who was a minister in Galt, Ontario, and also an ardent anti-unionist, Fraser would strongly influence Presbyterians, both on and off the Island, to save the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The Presbyterian General Assembly, which met in 1917 in Montreal, decided to observe a truce between the dissidents and the unionists until after the war. But combat was resumed in 1920 when the General Assembly resurrected the Union Committee, which had not met since the truce began. This action was no doubt taken partly because of pressure from the large number of union congregations which had come into existence, especially in the west, in anticipation of church union.<sup>38</sup> The unionists had appeared trapped, for they faced the likely formation of an independent denomination in the west if the national union project was scrapped, or the loss of a host of Presbyterians if union was finalized. Then the Assembly, which convened in Port Arthur in June 1923, made the momentous decision, in the face of ardent protest, to consummate union based on the terms set forth in proposed legislation.<sup>39</sup>

The Port Arthur decision precipitated important moves by unionists in the Maritimes. The Maritime Synod in 1923 formed both a Maritime Union Committee and a Maritime Joint Union Committee.<sup>40</sup> On the Island, unionists arranged for public addresses by prominent unionist churchmen<sup>41</sup> and formed in the presbytery a Union Committee which hoped to "foster the Union policy of the General Assembly in the congregations".<sup>42</sup> Presbyterian and Methodist unionists also developed provincial legislation, under the supervision of the Committee on Law and Legislation located in Toronto, in order to effect union between the denominations and vest their local church property in the new United Church.<sup>43</sup> The drafting of legislation was placed in the hands of the respected Summerside criminal lawyer Albert C. Saunders, who was also leader of the small provincial Liberal opposition and a strong church unionist.<sup>44</sup> Saunders had a draft for the Island completed by the time the House opened on 12 March 1924. The Island Church Union Bill was eventually introduced on 25 March 1924. A controversial section, which was altered in subsequent federal and provincial legislation, would

38 Clifford, *Resistance*, pp. 116-7. Clifford states that three thousand union congregations had been formed. Certain Maritime churches had also initiated cooperative arrangements or even united in expectation of union. See Buttimer, "Great Expectations", p. 102. Perhaps the best example of union enthusiasm on the Island was evident in Lower Montague where Methodists and Presbyterians built a union church in 1922. D.W. Johnston, *History of Methodism in Eastern British America* (Sackville, N.B., n.d.), p. 228.

39 Clifford, *Resistance*, pp. 119-20, 140-1.

40 This was the first time, apparently, that the Maritime Synod had an official public discussion of church union. See Maritime Synod Minutes, 1923, MCA.

41 See the *Daily Patriot* (Charlottetown), 7, 8 November 1923, and the *Charlottetown Guardian*, 7 November 1923.

42 Presbytery Minutes, 6 November 1923, MCA.

43 The British North America Act, 1867, section 92 (13) makes provincial legislatures responsible for provincial property.

44 Saunders to Whitehead, 23 January 1924, Church Union Collection [CUC], series II, box 23, file 437, United Church of Canada Archives [UCA], Toronto.

have forced all Presbyterians into the United Church, but with the proviso that congregations by a majority vote could withdraw within the six-month period after the consummation of union.

Island unionists now faced the challenge of having this important bill win third reading in the spring session of 1924. Of the 30 seats in the House, 25 were held by the Conservatives and the remainder by Saunders and his Liberal colleagues. Presbyterian members accounted for at least 10 seats and the other 20 were divided among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists and Baptists.<sup>45</sup> Conservative leader James Stewart was a member of the Kirk of St. James in Charlottetown, an anti-unionist and a financial contributor to the dissident Presbyterian Church Association. Yet Stewart had earlier assured Rev. George Christie of Alberton, the leading Presbyterian unionist on P.E.I., that the House would only take an interest in the regularity of the bill, not in the issue of church union itself.<sup>46</sup> Hence unionists had every good reason to hope for swift and smooth passage of the bill.<sup>47</sup> While church unionists organized and schemed, Presbyterian dissidents across the country and on P.E.I. prepared to defend the threatened walls of their denomination. The local chapter of the Presbyterian Church Association distributed books, circulars and pamphlets to members of the legislature early in 1924 before the House opened.<sup>48</sup> Rev. William Orr Mulligan, the avowed anti-unionist minister at the Kirk of St. James in Charlottetown, emerged as a leading dissident. Mulligan's background in law alerted him to the legal implications of the church union legislation. In a Memorandum on Church Union<sup>49</sup> which he sent to the premier and legislature members,<sup>50</sup> he contended, among other things, that a bill which swept all Presbyterians by legislation into a new church against their will along with church properties and endowments was a fundamental violation of religious freedom and civil interference in spiritual matters. Other leading dissidents also waved the red flag of religious coercion,<sup>51</sup> a theme which probably resonated most powerfully with Presbyterians of Free Church background whose forebears had rejected state control in ecclesiastical affairs. The Memorandum ended with the claim that the proposed legislative aim to extinguish the Presbyterian and Methodist churches violated all the laws of these two bodies which "never purported or were intended to contemplate winding up of either body".<sup>52</sup>

The church union bill predictably encountered some opposition in its passage

45 *Parliamentary Guide 1925*, pp. 506-20.

46 Stewart to Christie, 27 December 1923, Premier James Stewart Papers [Stewart Papers], PAPEI.

47 Christie to Whitehead, 8 March 1924, CUC, series II, box 22, file 438, UCA.

48 J.W. MacNamara to John Agnew, 28 November 1923, Presbyterian Church Association Papers (PCA Papers), box 1-2, file 2, Presbyterian Church Archives [PCA], Toronto.

49 The document was based on materials which had been prepared in Ontario. See Stewart Papers, PAPEI.

50 Before the House opened, Christie reported that the document was circulated to all Assembly members. Christie to Whitehead, 8 March 1924, CUC, series II, box 22, file 438, UCA.

51 See the sermon by Rev. John Keir Fraser, in the *Guardian*, 17 September 1924.

52 Mulligan to Premier Stewart, 15 February 1924, Stewart Papers, PAPEI.

through the legislature.<sup>53</sup> And unionists and dissidents engaged in a steady lobby, striving to turn up the pressure on the MLAs for their respective sides by resorting to the media in order to shape public opinion.<sup>54</sup> Indeed popular interest in the progress and fate of the church union bill was demonstrated by the crowds present in the Assembly corridors and gallery when the legislation came before the House for second reading on 9 April.<sup>55</sup> In spite of several earnest attempts at obstruction, on 11 April the church union bill received third reading with the support of a significant majority.<sup>56</sup> But the unionist victory was short-lived. For on the same day Lieutenant-Governor Murdoch MacKinnon withheld royal assent from the church union bill and prorogued the House.<sup>57</sup> This surprise move was a bombshell for the unionists as victory slipped through their fingers and into the hands of the dissidents. Unionists on P.E.I. were understandably shocked and angered by the lieutenant-governor's action. Saunders testified in a letter to Whitehead that the government had known nothing about MacKinnon's plan and that it had certainly not advised this course of action. He explained, "The Lieutenant Governor is a Presbyterian and an Anti-Unionist; he is a weak man, and was doubtless influenced by the Anti-Unionists, who are very strong in Charlottetown".<sup>58</sup> It was true that MacKinnon, who was entering his final year in his term as lieutenant-governor, was personally opposed to church union.<sup>59</sup> But Saunders' allegations were hardly an adequate explanation for MacKinnon's action. Saunders also immediately sent off an embittered letter to Prime Minister MacKenzie King protesting the lieutenant-governor's "autocratic" action and urging some redress.<sup>60</sup> Editorial opinion and letters to the editor in both the *Guardian* and the *Patriot* also pronounced against the lieutenant-governor's action, condemning it as an unacceptable violation of responsible government.<sup>61</sup> Of course, Island anti-unionists rejoiced that MacKinnon, a dissident Presbyterian conveniently situated

53 *Guardian*, 9, 10, 11 April 1924.

54 *Guardian*, 29, 31 March 1924 and the *Patriot*, 5 April 1924.

55 *Guardian*, 10 April 1924.

56 Neither the *Guardian* nor the *Patriot* reported the voting figures, thus possible alignments along party or religious lines cannot be examined.

57 *Patriot*, 12 April 1924. The withholding of assent is distinct from disallowance or reservation for the Governor General's approval. This was not the first time MacKinnon had withheld assent from a bill. In 1920 he had withheld assent from a bill designed to transfer the ownership of Government House to the Crown. Only two other cases of withholding assent had occurred in Island history up to 1950. See MacKinnon, *Government of Prince Edward Island* (Toronto, 1951), p. 154.

58 Saunders to Whitehead, 12 April 1924, CUC, series II, box 22, file 438, UCA.

59 MacKinnon was born in Brooklyn, P.E.I., 15 March 1865. He represented Fourth Kings as a Conservative from 1897 to 1919 and held the portfolio of Provincial Secretary-Treasurer and Commissioner of Agriculture in the Conservative Mathieson government from 1911 to 1919. He was appointed Lieutenant-Governor on 8 September 1919.

60 Saunders to MacKenzie King, 12 April 1924, CUC, series II, box 22, file 438, UCA. King himself was a Presbyterian and opposed to church union.

61 See the *Guardian*, 14, 21 April 1924 and the *Patriot*, 16, 17 April 1924.

in a position of power, had foiled the church union legislation.<sup>62</sup>

MacKinnon himself set forth his reasons for withholding assent in a letter of explanation to the Secretary of State written on April 17:

this Bill provides that the nonconcurring members of the Denominations mentioned therein shall by Legislation be forced into and become, for the time being, members of a body of which they do not approve. It also provides that their property shall, for the time being, become the property of an organization to be formed and known as the "United Church of Canada."

That they are given the privilege within a certain specified time to withdraw from that Body and accept a certain amount of property by arrangement and go back as near as may be to this present status is the only proof of the fact that they have now a legal standing that should be respected.

Freedom in all matters of public worship is so jealously guarded in all His Majesty's Dominions and sweeping interference by Legislation so seldom exercised that I deemed it advisable to withhold my assent.<sup>63</sup>

It is clear from MacKinnon's concluding comment that he believed the unionists were trying to slip through legislation which blatantly violated religious freedom — in this he evidently accorded with the central argument of Rev. William Orr Mulligan's Memorandum. MacKinnon apparently objected to the union bill on the grounds of its treatment of dissenting minorities; he implied that his veto was not based on opposition to the principle of church union itself.

The Office of the Secretary of State in Ottawa received MacKinnon's despatch and immediately forwarded it on April 24 to the minister of justice, Ernest Lapointe.<sup>64</sup> The Justice Department then prepared a report on the lieutenant-governor's unusual action, which it firmly censured. The report was then sent to the Privy Council in Ottawa on May 1. The Privy Council, in accord with the justice minister's constitutional arguments, regretted that P.E.I.'s lieutenant-governor had rejected the advice of the provincial legislative assembly. It further noted that because the church union bill had not been reserved for the Governor General's approval, it could not become effective by his assent. It was essentially dead. Indeed, the bill had to be reintroduced at the 1925 session of the House. The Privy Council then forwarded a copy of its relevant minutes to Lieutenant-Governor MacKinnon for further discussion with his government.

It is evident that the lieutenant-governor's withholding of assent from the church union bill was constitutionally suspect.<sup>65</sup> As Frank MacKinnon has pointed out,<sup>66</sup>

62 Agnew to MacNamara, 17 April 1924, PCA Papers, box 2-I, file 1, PCA and the *Guardian*, 22 April 1924.

63 Canada, House of Commons, *Sessional Papers*, 1924, No. 276.

64 The sequence of events involving the federal government was reconstructed from *Sessional Papers*, 1924, No. 276.

65 The following studies have examined his action from a constitutional standpoint: Eugene A.

even if the lieutenant-governor had the advice of the premier and his cabinet, and it was reported that he did,<sup>67</sup> his action still violated the accepted principle of responsible government.<sup>68</sup> But there were other considerations which, in retrospect, lend some legitimacy to MacKinnon's action. It seems that he was genuinely concerned about the coercive elements of the church union bill, especially its enforced union of dissident congregations, who could only leave the new church by voting themselves out within the six-month period after the consummation of union. He apparently thought that the churches should have a choice on entering union in the first place, and that the bill should be changed and re-introduced at the next session.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the Island presbytery on 1 May 1923 had unanimously supported the option for nonconcurring Presbyterians to withdraw from union before it was effected<sup>70</sup> and subsequent federal and provincial church union legislation did make this crucial provision. Furthermore, contrary to Saunders' view, MacKinnon probably did not oppose the legislation merely because he was an anti-unionist, for it was his last year in office and he would have known that the church union bill would be reintroduced at the next session of the House in 1925. It is unlikely, moreover, that he would have risked official disapprobation on the flimsy ground of personal objection to the principle of the bill. In addition, Frank MacKinnon has indicated his father believed that church bills did not get adequate attention in the legislature. Finally, Frank MacKinnon claims that, in general, there was a lack of guidance for lieutenant-governors on withholding assent.<sup>71</sup> Hence, Murdoch MacKinnon had some grounds for flirting with constitutional heresy when he withheld assent from the P.E.I. church union bill on 11 April 1924.

Even though union had been temporarily derailed on P.E.I. by the lieutenant-governor's action, the thrust towards it at the national level continued apace. The persistent protests of dissidents, including Islanders, against church union at the Presbyterian General Assembly in Owen Sound on 4-11 June 1924 were of no avail as the majority of the delegates still favoured it, and the necessary legislation was

Forsey, "Disallowance of Provincial Acts, Reservation of Provincial Bills, and Refusal of Assent by Lieutenant-Governors Since 1867", *Canadian Journal of Economic and Political Science*, IV (February 1938), pp. 47-59 and Frank MacKinnon, "The Royal Assent in Prince Edward Island: Disallowance of Provincial Acts, Reservation of Provincial Bills and the Giving and Withholding of Assent by Lieutenant-Governors", *Canadian Journal of Economic and Political Science*, XV (1949), pp. 216-20 and *Government of Prince Edward Island*, pp. 154-5.

- 66 Frank MacKinnon is Murdoch MacKinnon's son. He seems to present a balanced account and fair assessment of his father's actions in this case.
- 67 MacKinnon, "The Royal Assent in Prince Edward Island", p. 217. No documentary evidence was found to support this claim.
- 68 Forsey, "Disallowance of Provincial Acts", following the Minister of Justice Report, censures his veto on this ground.
- 69 Frank MacKinnon to author, 20 February 1988.
- 70 Presbytery Minutes, 1 May 1923, MCA.
- 71 MacKinnon to author, 20 February 1988.

already before Ottawa's House of Commons Private Bills Committee.<sup>72</sup> During the Committee hearings, unionists insisted that the identity of the uniting churches went with the majority and, therefore, the minority anti-unionists had no right to the name of the Presbyterian Church in Canada or to claim continuity with it.<sup>73</sup> Dissidents deeply resented this claim. Yet on 28 May unionist counsel did introduce a key amendment which would at least allow anti-unionist congregations to vote themselves out of the United Church prior to the act coming into force on 10 June 1925.<sup>74</sup> Island dissidents had unsuccessfully agitated for such an amendment to the provincial bill of 1924. The amended federal bill was considered by the House of Commons in June and July of 1924. It was supported by a majority and hence passed on 4 July and received Royal Assent on 19 July.<sup>75</sup> Church union was now a foregone conclusion. It was only necessary for Presbyterian congregations to decide their own fate at the local level by voting between the stipulated dates of 10 December 1924 and 10 June 1925, the day on which the Canadian church union would take place.

From the end of the summer of 1924 to 10 June 1925 dissidents mounted a passionate campaign to preserve Island Presbyterianism. Prominent anti-unionist ministers from both on and off the Island assailed the unionists' arguments and strategies.<sup>76</sup> Anti-union sentiment was rising on P.E.I. and its intensity was registered, sustained, even increased, by a small number of vocal and apparently tireless dissident Presbyterian ministers like George Taylor and William Orr Mulligan from the two prominent Charlottetown churches of Zion and St. James. Unionists were well aware of the daily campaigning of both these men, and at the conclusion of most congregational voting in April, Saunders, the unionists' lawyer on P.E.I., alleged that they were to blame for the opposition to union on the Island.<sup>77</sup> But unionist ministers were hardly reticent to enter the fray and their impact on congregations was undeniable. Some lay people even complained that

72 Principal Daniel Fraser's motion at the General Assembly that union proceedings be stopped until the civil courts had decided on their constitutionality was defeated 444 to 92. Two other Island ministers, Reverends George Taylor and George Mitchell, also signed a formal protest which was presented to the General Assembly. Twelve Islanders were present. *The Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada [Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church, 1924]*, p. 44.

73 D.J.M. Corbett has argued that subsequent judicial decisions show the courts' belief that the United Church of Canada was something new and not merely a merging of existing religious traditions. See "The Legal Problems of the Canadian Church Union of 1925", in *The Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Papers 1979*, PCA.

74 Clifford, *Resistance*, p. 158.

75 "An Act incorporating The United Church of Canada", *Statutes of Canada 1924*, 14-15 George V, C. 100. The controversial treatment of the dissident minority in Canada was avoided in the union movement which led in 1977 to the Uniting Church in Australia. Unionist leaders there learned from the Canadian experience. See Alan W. Black, "Church Union in Canada and Australia: A Comparative Analysis", *Australian-Canadian Studies*, 1, no. 1 (January 1983), pp. 52-3.

76 For example, see the well-publicized sermon by Rev. John Keir Fraser preached in Alberton on 31 August 1924 in the *Guardian*, 17 September 1924 and the *Patriot*, 22 September 1924.

77 Saunders to Whitehead, April 1925, CUC, series II, box 22, file 440, UCA.

the union movement was being snowballed by unseemly clerical pushing.<sup>78</sup>

The two previous votes in 1912 and 1915 had demonstrated overwhelming support for church union among Island Presbyterians; the final voting results in 1925 revealed a serious deterioration in union enthusiasm. About 46 per cent of the voters, or 2,608 out of 5,737 members, said "no" to union with the Methodists on P.E.I.<sup>79</sup> Nationally, about 48 per cent voted against the union. In P.E.I. at least 89 per cent of the membership, or 5,737 out of 6,438, voted, in contrast to only 63 per cent in 1915 and 70 per cent in 1912. In 1925 only 63 per cent of the national Presbyterian membership voted.<sup>80</sup> Hence the 1925 vote was a broader measure of the Island memberships' sentiments than the earlier votes had been.

Undoubtedly, the campaigning skill and persistence of the dissident ministers — especially of Mulligan and Taylor, who brought to their efforts all the prestige and status of their two large Charlottetown congregations — and the decisive implications of the vote, underlined by the imminence of actual church union, account for the surprising turn-around. Furthermore, the unionists' intransigence regarding the controversial provision in the 1924 provincial union bill, which would have forced all Presbyterians into the United Church while allowing them to vote themselves out within six months, probably did little to further their cause. The coerciveness of the provision had been underscored by the dissidents' hue and cry of religious compulsion, by the lieutenant-governor's withholding of assent, and by the elimination of this clause from the national church union bill in the summer of 1924.

Presbyterian anti-unionist sentiment had obviously spread by 1925; but recognition of this increase needs to be balanced by a review of the actual numbers of churches and members that entered union. Out of 73 Presbyterian preaching points on P.E.I. in 1925, 48 or (66 per cent), voted to enter union, one church recorded a tie, and 24 chose to remain Presbyterian. And eventually 3,672, or 57 per cent, of the total Presbyterian membership in 1925 joined the United Church and 2,766, or 43 per cent, remained out.<sup>81</sup> Unionist membership proportions were lower than the overall Maritime proportions, where 68 per cent of the Presbyterian membership decided to enter the United Church. Thus, the Island's proportional membership in the Maritime Synod increased from 12 per cent before union to 16 per cent afterwards. Ontario and Quebec revealed the sharpest resistance to union:

78 See an anonymous letter signed "The Pew" in the *Guardian*, 29 November 1924.

79 The Island voting figures in this paragraph are informed estimates rather than exact figures, for two reasons. The presbytery voting records, found in P.E.I. Presbytery Minutes, 12 May 1925, MCA, were not quite complete, and ten congregations, instead of holding an individual poll, voted unanimously at a general church meeting to enter the union. Since the numbers at these general meetings were not reported, the approximate membership of these ten congregations was included as part of the above voting figures. That 43 per cent of the Presbyterian membership finally remained out of union removes any doubt that resistance to union was substantial by the 1925 congregational vote.

80 These calculations were made by comparing the 1924 Presbyterian provincial and national membership figures given in the *Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church, 1924* with the total votes polled both provincially and nationally.

81 *Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church, 1926*, p. 133.

only 47 per cent of the provinces' membership concurred. Eighty-three per cent of Presbyterians west of Ontario united with the Methodists.

All 68 Island Methodist preaching stations slid placidly into union apparently without so much as a ripple of dissent. Their sole chance to register an opinion had been in 1912, when they had overwhelmingly supported union. By 1925 they were experiencing a shortage of ministers, which union promised to overcome. Furthermore, unlike Presbyterian ownership arrangements, Methodist church property was held by the denomination as a whole. Opposition to union in 1925 probably would have meant the automatic forfeiture of church property to the United Church. Methodist concurrence, therefore, was most likely rooted in its more "centralized" denominational structure.<sup>82</sup>

Unionists and dissidents had fought tooth and nail in the local churches to win a majority to their side during the fall and winter of 1924-5; then in the spring of 1925 they again had to shift their battle to the legislative arena. Since the original church union bill had been vetoed by the lieutenant-governor at the 1924 session of the House, unionists were forced to reintroduce it in 1925. The major amendments incorporated into this 1925 bill had necessarily been drawn from the federal United Church of Canada Act, under which the Island Presbyterian congregations had voted. The most important revision, and the one demanded earlier by the dissidents, was made to Section 7; the amendment allowed congregations to vote themselves out of union in the six-month period preceding 10 June 1925, instead of after this date.<sup>83</sup>

In spite of the vigorous opposition of certain members, a carefully orchestrated presentation before the legislature on 25 March by about 150 anti-unionists,<sup>84</sup> and a similar counter-move by unionists just two days later on 27 March,<sup>85</sup> the legislation passed third reading on 10 April.<sup>86</sup> The only significant amendment to the bill had been the addition of a clause which provided for the establishment of a provincial property commission to guard the rights of minorities.<sup>87</sup> Lieutenant-Governor Hartz's approval of the bill was predictable, since the federal union legislation had already passed. Even if Hartz, then in his first year of office, had been disposed against the bill, the memory of the federal government censure of MacKinnon for his veto of it in 1924 would have discouraged him from following MacKinnon's example.

82 See Black, "Church Union in Canada and Australia", p. 53. Local church property was vested in a national incorporated denomination in 1884. This denomination had decided to go into union and by The Church Union Act of 1924 all its property was vested in the new United Church of Canada. The Methodist Church, unlike the Presbyterian, made no provision for local congregations to vote themselves out of the union and to retain church property. See Section 4, "An Act Respecting the Union of Certain Methodist Churches Therein Named", *Act of the Parliament of the Dominion of Canada 1884*, 47 Victoria, Vol. II, C.106, p. 277.

83 See "An Act Respecting the Union of Certain Churches Therein Named", *Statutes of P.E.I., 1925*, 15 George V, C. 19, pp. 140-69.

84 *Guardian and Patriot*, 26 March 1925.

85 *Guardian*, 28 March 1925 and the *Patriot*, 27, 28 March 1925.

86 *Guardian*, 11 April 1925.

87 *Patriot*, 31 March 1925.



Before 10 June the impact of church union on P.E.I. had already been experienced during the bitter debating, the intense campaigning, the congregational voting, and the inevitable disruptions at the local church and presbytery levels. After the impressive Inaugural Service of the United Church in Toronto on 10 June, when the federal United Church of Canada Act came into force, the period of separating, sorting out, consolidating and merging, which began after the voting in the winter of 1925, would continue until the provincial Court of Appeal in May 1927 delivered a final judgement to settle the church property disputes that had proliferated across the Island. By 1928 the United Church of Canada on P.E.I. could boast 7,208 members made up of about 3,672 former Presbyterians and 3,536 former Methodists, and 108 United Churches formed from 68 former Methodist preaching stations and 73 former Presbyterian churches or minority unionist groups.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, the Presbyterian Church on P.E.I. lost 57 per cent of its membership, 66 per cent of its churches,<sup>89</sup> and 79 per cent of its clergy to the United Church of Canada.<sup>90</sup> In at least 31 churches out of 73 a split occurred where more than ten members left. The remaining 42 churches suffered some loss of membership. Twenty-eight Presbyterian churches eventually formed two new congregations, one a Presbyterian and the other a United church. By 1927 there were 2,786 Presbyterian members remaining and 44 preaching stations.<sup>91</sup> Thus, in members, ministers and churches, the Presbyterian Church on P.E.I. was reduced to less than half its former strength. Ironically, the combined number of churches from each denomination in 1928 represented an increase of 11 churches over the number of Methodist and Presbyterian churches in 1924. Despite the unionist hope for increased efficiency through the consolidation of Presbyterian and Methodist congregations, union had actually increased the number of these churches from 141 in 1924 to 152 in 1928.

A significant merging of the Methodist and Presbyterian denominations did occur on P.E.I. in 1925. Church union meant much more than a change of denominational label. Out of a total for both denominations of 141 preaching stations in 1924, groups of ten or more members in at least 20 Presbyterian churches eventually united with Methodists; combined, over 40 Methodist and Presbyterian congregations were involved in actual unions. Of the total Island United Church membership in 1925 of 7,219, at least 42 per cent, or 3,064 members, were involved in union churches.<sup>92</sup> This is a conservative estimate and does not include the children under age 12 or the adherents of the congregations. These estimates clearly show that the Island experienced a real union of

88 These figures have been taken from the following statistical reports: *The United Church of Canada, Yearbook* (1928) and the *Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church, 1924*, pp. 296-7.

89 Some of these property losses would actually be regained in early May 1927 through a P.E.I. Court of Appeal decision.

90 The calculations in this paragraph are based on a comparison of the P.E.I. Presbytery statistics provided in the *Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church, 1924-7*.

91 *Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church, 1927*, p. 181.

92 These calculations are based on an extensive review of the available local church records in the PAPEI, and the United Church Presbytery and Continuing Presbytery statistical reports of 1925-7.

congregations.

The factors and conditions which decisively affected how Presbyterians responded to church union in 1925 on P.E.I. included the ideology of dissidents and unionists, the impact of ministers and the social conditions of out-migration, localism and regionalism.<sup>93</sup> The high ideal of ecumenism, when commended as the divine will of Christ, was a formidable weapon in the unionists' arsenal. Many unionists testified that this ideal of unity in Christ's Body, the Church, persuaded them to support church union in 1925.<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, the dissident ideology of loyalty to Presbyterianism and to the cause of religious freedom was also persuasive. The Scottish Presbyterian heritage was old and time-tested. It had formed an important part of the identity of many Islanders for generations.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, it had jealously guarded religious liberty at crucial points in its history.<sup>96</sup>

The arguments for or against church union were most frequently propounded by ministers, and they were the most influential players in the drama of church union on the Island. This influence was based on the singular moral and spiritual authority which they possessed as ordained religious leaders in their communities. Moreover, in comparison with the rural farming population, Presbyterian ministers were often highly educated and articulate community members who commanded respect. The minister, as a spiritual guide and counsellor, was typically a figure of moral authority for many congregation members; thus his expectations and standards deeply influenced their behaviour. Both written and oral sources attest to the central role of ministers in the church union movement on P.E.I.<sup>97</sup> John Andersen, a Charlottetown lawyer, claimed that the voting had been "almost entirely in the possession of the clergy" and estimated that 80 per cent of the clerics had used their positions "to influence and dominate, without reasonable check, the votes of the people...."<sup>98</sup> The case for clerical influence can be overstated; it is well to remember that nine Presbyterian congregations voted against the unionist sympathies of their ministers.

In addition to the power of ideology and ministerial influence, factors which

93 The important efforts to explain the reasons for the response of Presbyterians to the union movement, a preoccupation with many union analysts, must remain tentative. It is impossible to plumb the complexity of individual motives for acting in one way rather than another. Broad interpretations which have been offered include social status, a Scottish superiority complex, the influence of educational leaders, an attempt to gain cultural hegemony, anti-Catholicism and the alleged temperamental uncooperativeness of Presbyterians.

94 See Rev. MacLellan's sermon in the *Guardian*, 21 November 1924. Unionist letters to the editors of Island newspapers almost always repeated the ecumenical argument for union.

95 See Rev. John Fraser's sermon in the *Guardian*, 17 September 1924.

96 See Moir, *Enduring Witness*, pp. 14, 17, 19.

97 Interviews with Rev. James MacGowan, Pinette, 15 June 1988, Rev. Donald Campbell, Charlottetown, 23 June 1988, Mrs. Ruby McWilliams and Mrs. Buchanan, Eldon, 8 July 1988, Mrs. Bertha Smith, Hunter River, 29 June 1988, Reginald MacNutt, Charlottetown, 16 June 1988, Miss Suzanne MacKinnon, Charlottetown, 16 June 1988 and Harold Martin, Orwell Cove, 15 June 1988.

98 Andersen to Stewart, n.d., Stewart Papers, PAPEI.

were certainly not unique to P.E.I., the numerical decline within some congregations, related to out-migration, was a crucial trend which made union attractive to many Island Presbyterians.<sup>99</sup> Frequently, those churches which were small and declining in membership joined the United Church so that they could unite with another congregation and bolster their strength. For example, in Kings County between 1891 and 1931 there was a 28 per cent population loss, which stood in contrast to only 19 per cent in Queens County and 14 per cent in Prince County for the same period. Of 13 Island Presbyterian charges which showed a membership decline from 1915 to 1924, nine of these, representing 19 of the 24 preaching stations, were found in Kings County. Consequently, resistance to church union was lowest in this county. Only 34 per cent of the Presbyterian membership resisted church union here compared to 41 per cent in Prince and 49 per cent in Queens. Perhaps it was portentous that the Island's first union congregation was formed in 1922 in Kings County.<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, the larger and more stable Island Presbyterian churches, like Zion, St. James, and St. John's, Belfast, generally voted against union. While the 1920s perhaps were a period of dawning demoralization and disillusionment, on P.E.I. as well as in the rest of the Maritimes, church union was probably viewed by some in the region as an opportunity in the religious sphere to fight back against decline.<sup>101</sup>

Factors in Island society which inhibited a national perspective partly explain the strength of dissident Presbyterianism. Social stability on P.E.I. and considerable isolation from the modernizing trends occurring elsewhere in Canada preserved traditional loyalties to religion, ethnic roots and empire; many Islanders probably judged change unnecessary and disruptive. Along with this social stability there existed a relative — isolation of both the province itself as an island with its own sharply defined borders and the rural agricultural communities within it — which encouraged local independence and absorption in community affairs. This further checked the creation of a strong national consciousness and identification among Islanders. And when such localism was combined with a heightened sense of regionalism and concern for Maritime Rights within Confederation because of relative economic underdevelopment and declining political and demographic importance,<sup>102</sup> the influences militating against

99 There is some parallel here between the appeal of church union and that of college federation in the Maritimes in the 1920s. The attraction of both movements was partly engendered by the problems of economic decline and out-migration in the region and the desire to concentrate resources for greater efficiency. William S. Learned and Kenneth C.M. Sills, *Education in the Maritime Provinces of Canada* (New York, 1922), p. 30-1, and Walter C. Murray, "College Union in the Maritime Provinces", *Dalhousie Review*, Vol. XI, no. 4 (1922-3), p. 416.

100 See *Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church, 1925*, pp. 410-3 and 1924, pp. 294-7.

101 John Reid, in *Six Crucial Decades: Times of Change in the History of the Maritimes* (Halifax, 1987), has called the 1920s a "Decade of Struggle" to highlight the evident fact that Maritimers did not passively accept the declining significance of their region in Confederation.

102 See Forbes, *Maritime Rights Movement*, Reid, *Six Crucial Decades*, p. 161, and Kenneth Jones, "Response to Regional Disparity in the Maritime Provinces, 1926-1942: A Study in Intergovernmental Relations", M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1980, pp. 4-28. Regional decline may have been paradoxical in its impact on church union, for it rendered

identification with the nation, and hence with an indigenous Canadian national church, were formidable.<sup>103</sup> It is perhaps surprising that the church union movement on P.E.I. gained the extensive support that it did.

The issue of church union on P.E.I. did not abruptly vanish after the division of congregations and the official union of 10 June 1925. The intense heat of debate did cool for a time, but it was rekindled in 1926 by volatile disputes over church property rights. This phase of the church union drama on P.E.I. would again show the advantage for dissidents of having supporters in key positions of public authority. After union in June 1925, Presbyterians entertained a cautious hope that they could perhaps recover some of their lost church property — through the vote they had been bereft of 48 out of 73 preaching stations. This tempered optimism was sustained by clause 29 of the provincial United Church of Canada Act (1925) which provided for a Provincial Property Commission to investigate church property disputes.<sup>104</sup> The three-member Property Commission, to be chosen by the Presbyterian and United churches, was to investigate voting and property disputes and to recommend additions or amendments to the Act at the next session of the legislature. The Presbyterian Church Presbytery quickly moved in July to establish this Commission;<sup>105</sup> but the United Church was uncooperative.<sup>106</sup> It feared that the Commission might disturb the property status quo which then included for the United Church fully 116 churches on P.E.I. Hence, it was only by mid-February 1926, when United Church leaders felt compelled to act from fear of public opinion that they were stalling, that the Commission appointments were finalized;<sup>107</sup> but by then the commissioners had little time to begin their work before the opening of the spring session of the legislature.

The Presbyterians had been sceptical about the very limited powers of the Commission under the Church Union Act of 1925 and were disappointed by the apparent studied inertia of the United Church during the fall and winter of 1925-6. Moreover, they were emboldened by a poignant sense of grievance at the denominational shambles which lay in the wake of union. They therefore sought an

attractive the option of uniting with another denomination in order to bolster local resources and numbers while creating a sense of regionalism perhaps inimical to any nationalist sentiment which undergirded the appeal of a United Church of Canada.

103 In "Regionalism, Nationalism and Social Gospel Support", Ross has noted that geographical isolation and regionalism can undermine ecumenical sentiment (p. 12). But he claims that in the Canadian West the sense of regional disparity furthered union because Protestant westerners saw the United Church as a means to overcome regional inequities. The unionist leaders, he claims, advocated equal opportunity for all regions and classes of Canada. I found no evidence in the Island union debates that the United Church was presented as a means to redefine Confederation in favour of the Maritimes and the West. If Presbyterians voted for union it was often because this option promised an immediate solution to congregational demoralization.

104 Provincial Property Commissions were also set up in Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. As well, a Dominion Property Commission was established by the federal United Church of Canada Act with the mandate to divide equitably properties and funds administered in trust by the Presbyterian Church in Canada. For an overview of the work of these commissions see Clifford, *Resistance*, pp. 194-206.

105 Presbyterian Church Presbytery Minutes, 7 July 1925, PAPEI.

106 United Church Presbytery Minutes, 9 February 1926, MCA.

107 G. Christie to T. Moore, 24 February 1926, CUC, series II, box 22, file 431, UCA.

amendment to the act at the 1926 spring session of the legislature.<sup>108</sup> The amendment was successfully introduced into the House on 24 March and, with little reported resistance,<sup>109</sup> received third reading on March 31. It gave extensive power to the Commission, more than that attained by any other commission in Canada, to allocate property subject only to alteration or confirmation by the P.E.I. Court of Appeal, whose decree would be final and conclusive.<sup>110</sup> Although the Presbyterian leaders were elated by their legislative triumph, which was surely due in large measure to the presence of dissidents in the House like Premier James Stewart, the unionists, as one would have expected, were angered — they feared it would weaken their position and inflame subsiding passions over disputed properties.<sup>111</sup>

The Church Property Commission, reconstituted by the amendment, was composed of three lawyers — a United Church representative, William E. Bentley, a Presbyterian, Kenneth M. Martin, and the Commission chairman, Harold J. Palmer, an Anglican. That the Commission reports had to come before the Court of Appeal made Bentley nervous about the views of its three members, especially of Chief Justice John Mathieson, a Presbyterian and member of Saint James Presbyterian Church in Charlottetown.<sup>112</sup> He was rightly aware that Mathieson opposed church union. Indeed, in 1924 the Chief Justice had contributed financially to the Presbyterian Church Association, the dissident organization established to preserve Presbyterianism in Canada.<sup>113</sup> Time would tell if Bentley's fears that Mathieson would favour the dissidents were justified.

The Church Property Commission hearings were finally held in July, August and September 1926.<sup>114</sup> The Commission received 27 applications for relief of some kind. Nineteen of these were made on behalf of Presbyterian minority groups from congregations which had entered union. The requests covered shared use of a church, clear title to a church, title to a manse or compensation in the loss of a manse, and continued access to cemeteries. After the hearings, all three Commissioners filed their findings in separate reports with the Registrar of the Court of Appeal in Equity on 11 December 1926.<sup>115</sup> Debates on these findings were later held before the Court of Appeal from 8-10 March 1927.<sup>116</sup> Then on 3 May, almost one month after the hearings, the Court rendered its final judgement. The

108 Presbyterian Church Presbytery Minutes, 25 February 1926, PAPEI.

109 *Guardian*, 1 April 1926.

110 "An Act to Amend 'The United Church of Canada Act'", *Statutes of P.E.I., 1926*, 16 George V, C. 13, p. 47. Silcox found that of the six provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia and P.E.I. which had property commissions, the Island Commission had the greatest power. See Silcox, *Church Union in Canada*, p. 365.

111 United Church Presbytery Minutes, 5 May 1926, PAPEI.

112 Bentley to Whitehead, 2 June 1926, CUC, series II, box 22, file 445, UCA.

113 Box 3-VI, file 52, PCA Papers, PCA.

114 The following information is drawn from the report by William E. Bentley, "Prince Edward Island Church Property Commission Award", CUC, series II, box 22, file 451, UCA.

115 Bentley to R. Whitehead, 11 December 1926, CUC, series II, box 22, file 446, UCA.

116 *Guardian*, 9-11 March and *Patriot*, 8, 10, 11 March 1927.

ruling was a hard, but by this time not unexpected, blow for the nascent United Church on P.E.I. The judgement, printed in full for the benefit of the Island public in the *Guardian* of 4 May and the *Patriot* of 7 May 1927, confirmed the allocations and findings of the Church Property Commission in the cases where majority findings had been achieved. It ratified all 14 cases where Palmer and Martin had achieved an accord on the allocation of church property. Bentley had remained an isolated and disgruntled member of the Commission, and his findings were generally unacceptable to the other two. Continuing Presbyterians recouped nine churches, four of them formerly Methodist. Of course Presbyterian gains meant United Church losses. Moreover, three unionist minorities were refused their requests for shared use of churches with Presbyterian majorities. Again, it had been timely that a dissident Presbyterian, on this occasion Chief Justice Mathieson, held a position of high authority and power when the minority Presbyterians went seeking redress.

It seems clear that the Court, as well as the Church Property Commission, did attempt to make a just distribution of church properties in the very difficult situation which had been created by church union on P.E.I. Undoubtedly, Presbyterian minorities, while remaining faithful to their ancient traditions, suffered the greatest loss and inconvenience. In communities where the United Church held two church buildings in close proximity but could use only one, it was evident that justice required the allocation of one church to the dispossessed minority. Both Island presbyteries responded quickly and predictably to the 3 May Court of Appeal judgement. The Presbyterians were ecstatic;<sup>117</sup> the United Church leaders were incensed.<sup>118</sup> In spite of its bitterness, the United Church decided to reconcile itself to the Court findings and to bury the hatchet.<sup>119</sup>

Meanwhile, the United Church and Presbyterian churches on P.E.I. had begun the essential post-union tasks of reorganization and reconstruction, work which was, of course, carried on against the backdrop of similar work elsewhere in the Maritimes and throughout Canada at the local, regional and national levels. The approximately 2,760 Presbyterians on P.E.I. faced the greatest difficulties in reconstruction and reorganization. Their two major problems were the shortages of both church buildings and ministers.

As the work of reorganization and reconstruction continued apace among the Island Presbyterians and the United Church following 1925, the two denominations began to reveal divergent stances toward social reform. Before union both the Methodists and Presbyterians had been influenced to a certain extent by theological liberalism and the progressive social concerns of the social gospel.<sup>120</sup> But after the union on P.E.I. it soon became apparent that the social gospel impulse had been

117 Presbyterian Church Presbytery Minutes, 17 May 1927, PAPEI.

118 United Church Minutes, 3 May 1927, MCA.

119 Thane Campbell to Whitehead, 7 May 1927, CUC, series II, box 22, file 448, UCA,

120 See Emery, "The Origins of the Canadian Methodist Involvement in the Social Gospel Movement", Airhart, "The Eclipse of Revivalist Spirituality," Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*, and Kieseckamp, "Presbyterian and Methodist Divines".

largely channelled into the United Church.<sup>121</sup> Thus it was not the Presbyterian Church, but instead the largest and newest denomination, which became heir to the Protestant heritage of Island social progressivism. In sharp contrast to the United Church's preoccupation with social righteousness, the Presbyterians on the Island were engrossed in the basic quest for denominational survival.<sup>122</sup> Their social conservatism was paralleled by a similar theological and ecclesiastical conservatism.<sup>123</sup>

In the post-union era on P.E.I., Presbyterian and United Church members were at times distracted from their efforts at reorganization and social reform by the question of which denomination could rightfully claim historic continuity with the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Unionists had always maintained that the Presbyterian Church in Canada, through the legitimate decisions of its church courts, had decided to enter the United Church of Canada on 10 June 1925.<sup>124</sup> Hence, dissident Presbyterians who voted themselves out of the union, they asserted, could not claim continuity with the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and therefore had no right to use their former name. Unionists had actually ensured that the Presbyterians were legally denied the use of their traditional denominational title.<sup>125</sup> Of course, the Presbyterians had no intention of surrendering a name which they revered. Moir has underscored their perspective: "To use any other title would be an admission that the Presbyterian Church had entered union and that the present church was therefore a sect or offshoot rather than the true but disrupted Presbyterian Church in Canada".<sup>126</sup>

This issue of Presbyterian continuity and identity emerged periodically in different guises at the presbytery level on P.E.I.<sup>127</sup> But finally in 1939, at the request of a more flexible and accommodating United Church, Parliament passed an amendment to the United Church of Canada Act which resolved at the national level the drawn-out controversy over the Presbyterian identity of the contending

121 Moir, in *Enduring Witness*, pp. 235-6, has reached a similar conclusion about the Presbyterian Church nationally.

122 This was also the major concern of the Maritime Synod. Social issues were not discussed in 1925 and the only concerns in this area shown in 1926 and 1927 were the convening of an Immigration and Settlement Committee and the passage of resolutions supporting the temperance cause. *Maritime Synod Minutes*, 5-7 October 1926, pp. 21-35 and 4-6 October 1927, pp. 37-50.

123 Presbyterian Church Presbytery Minutes, 16 November 1926, 8 May 1928, 3 March 1929 and 1931, PAPEI.

124 The Preamble of the United Church of Canada Act set forth the right of the three negotiating churches "to unite with one another without loss of their identity...." *Statutes of Canada, 1924*, 14-15 George V, C. 100. See also *Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church, 1925*, pp. 34-5.

125 Both the federal and provincial acts entrenched this denial with the words, "The non-concurring congregations in connection, or in communion with any of the negotiating Churches may use, to designate the said congregations, any names other than the names of the negotiating Churches, as set forth in the Preamble of this Act...." *Statutes of Canada, 1924*, 14-15 George V, C. 100 and *Statutes of P.E.I., 1925*, 15 George V, C. 19.

126 See Moir, *Enduring Witness*, p. 231.

127 United Church Presbytery Minutes, 9 February 1926, MCA. Presbyterian Church Presbytery Minutes, 16 July 1929, 23 May 1930 and 8 September 1936, PAPEI.

denominations.<sup>128</sup> This important amendment, entitled "An Act Respecting The United Church of Canada Act", brought the perennial conflict to a close by granting Presbyterians in Canada the legal right to use their traditional name while not in any way violating the rights or powers of the United Church of Canada.<sup>129</sup> In essence, a welcome compromise was struck — from then on both denominations had the right to claim identity and continuity with the pre-1925 Presbyterian Church in Canada. Clifford concludes: "The controversy ended...because justice was perceived to have been done, and it proved to be a happy solution to a difficult problem, a solution that has enabled these institutions to live together without mutual hostility ever since".<sup>130</sup> Perhaps because of the Second World War, an Island equivalent to the federal amendment of 1939 did not pass into law until 1947. This law finally permitted Island Presbyterians the legal right to their traditional name of "The Presbyterian Church in Canada".<sup>131</sup> Its passage brought to an official close on P.E.I. a delicate and disturbing conflict which had intermittently plagued relations between the Presbyterian and United churches for many years.

The impact of church union in 1925 on the Island Methodist and Presbyterian churches was of great consequence. The traditional Protestant denominational landscape was abruptly rearranged as Methodism disappeared, Presbyterianism was reduced by more than one-half from 6,438 to 2,766 members, and the large United Church of Canada on P.E.I. emerged to claimed 7,219 members. The earlier Methodist and Presbyterian social reform traditions became largely identified with the United Church. And ministers in both the union and dissident camps were notable casualties of church union. The often unrestrained, emotion-packed verbal warfare of the union debates in the presbytery, the local churches and the media violated an Island norm of self-control,<sup>132</sup> and was therefore especially damaging to the most prominent offenders, the clergy. The very human (and fallible) characteristics revealed by the religious leaders in the heat of argument and debate thus aroused a degree of cynicism about their spiritual and moral qualities.<sup>133</sup>

Church union seriously altered many Protestant communities on P.E.I., often permanently. In some places a new and broader religious, and hence social, solidarity was created where Methodist and Presbyterian congregations or minority groups merged. But the union was unfortunately accompanied by disruption, strife and bitterness at the personal, local and leadership levels of Island life. Friendships and families were often disrupted. And the seriousness of the division in Island

128 Clifford was the first historian to point out the significance of this final event in the denouement of the 1925 church union controversy: *Resistance*, pp. 223-35.

129 *Statutes of Canada, 1939*, 3 George VI, C. 65, section 30.

130 Clifford, *Resistance*, p. 235.

131 *Statutes of P.E.I., 1947*, 11 George VI, C. 58.

132 Weale, "No Scope for the Imagination", p. 6.

133 This result of church union was brought to my attention by Rev. Donald Campbell, interview in East Royalty, 23 June 1988. It is difficult to say how much cynicism about the clerical estate already existed as a result of the prominent roles played by churchmen in earlier vicious disputes over education on P.E.I.



society was deepened by its uniquely large Presbyterian following, by the central role religion continued to play in life, by the intensity of the union controversy aroused by ardent unionist and dissident leaders, and by the sturdy cohesiveness of community life. For these reasons church union in the 1920s transformed the "garden reposed" into the "garden distressed".

The Island dissidents believed that in church union a snake had entered the Garden. Meanwhile, Island unionists were convinced that the serpent of Christian division was being expelled. The dissidents aimed to conserve a revered and valued Protestant tradition, and in the process they defended denominationalism and religious pluralism, whether they meant to or not. Moreover, in their zeal to protect the Presbyterian Church from the assault of unionists, they championed religious liberty and fidelity to the past.<sup>134</sup> On the other hand, the unionists, by creating a new ecumenical denomination, realized the ideal of Christian unity, responded to the need for religion to adjust to changing historical circumstances, and promoted social harmony and stability by working toward a broader moral and religious consensus.

134 Clifford has argued that the Presbyterian resistance to union protected denominationalism, religious pluralism and religious freedom in Canada: *Resistance*, p. 241.