

# How the West was one: the Presbytery of Calgary-Macleod

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There are not many presbyteries that can trace their beginnings to the days of the Wild West, but the Presbytery of Calgary-Macleod is certainly one of them. The first Presbyterian minister to come to Alberta, Rev. A.B. Baird, arrived on the scene in 1881--a time when Confederation was still fresh, the Northwest Mounted Police had been recently formed, the railway was completed, treaties were being signed with First Nations people, and that great icon of the West, the buffalo, had been nearly wiped out. With the completion of the railway came miners, cowboys, immigrants and job seekers. The Mounties soon had their hands full.

The presbytery includes Lethbridge, a city that was among the wildest in the West when it was incorporated in 1883, and Medicine Hat, a city whose name alone conjures up images (in cinemascope) of open plains and rugged mountains. Calgary had its beginnings as a Northwest Mounted Police fort, built in 1875 to prevent American whiskey traders from doing business with the Indians.

In Western Canadian terms, Presbyterianism in southern Alberta has deep roots. The person most responsible for planting those roots was the industrious Rev. James Robertson, appointed the first superintendent of Western missions in 1881. Under his diligent preparation, Presbyterian worship services soon followed, conducted by Rev. Angus Robertson (no relation) in Calgary and Medicine Hat in 1883 and Rev. Charles McKillop in Lethbridge in 1885. (Upon Mr. Robertson's death in Jan. 1902, it was necessary to appoint three men to handle the work he alone had been doing.)

Today, the Presbytery of Calgary-Macleod extends from the British Columbia border and Rocky Mountains, across the Prairies to Saskatoon, and from Calgary to the United States border. In 1969, the Presbytery of Macleod amalgamated with the Presbytery of Calgary. Although the congregations from the former Macleod presbytery have become fewer in number, the congregations of Banff, Bassano, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat have remained vibrant. The result is one of the healthiest presbyteries in the church. Today, there are 17 congregations in the presbytery: 10 in Calgary (one of the country's fastest growing cities), two each in Lethbridge and Medicine Hat, one in the resort town of Banff, and the two-point charge of Gem and Bassano, the only rural charge remaining in the presbytery. Of those 17 congregations, three from Calgary have been added to the presbytery within the past 15 years--Westminster, Valleyview and Trinity. With both faith and good cause, the presbytery has purchased land in the growing-edge, north-central and far southwestern parts of Calgary for possible future church development.

Meanwhile, the existing congregations continue to provide a strong witness to the work of the church. St. Andrew's, Lethbridge, is known for its Christian education work. It is the main source of support for the Ecumenical Campus Ministry at the University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge Community College. Its Sunday services are videotaped and broadcast over local cable TV. Bethlen Church, although much smaller in numbers, continues to serve the Hungarian Presbyterian community faithfully.

In Medicine Hat, St. John's celebrated the 100th anniversary of its church building (the original) in 2002. Riverside Church is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Although relatively young, the Riverside congregation also has an interesting history. It began during the heady days of the '50s and '60s and an experiment called The Presbyterian Training School. The school in Medicine Hat for training laity was created by the Synod of Alberta and supported by the Women's Missionary Society and the Board of Christian Education.

In Banff, St. Paul's finds itself in the unusual and enviable situation of having the world come to its doors. Located in a national park, St. Paul's has a significant increase in attendance during ski season and the congregation is dotted with new faces every Sunday. The two-point charge of Knox, Bassano, and Gem Church continues to demonstrate the hard-working and lasting character of the rural community it serves.

Rudyard Kipling once remarked that Medicine Hat had "all hell for a basement." It was, of course, a reference to the vast reserves of natural gas beneath the land and not to the local theology. The Presbytery of Calgary-Macleod continues to give evidence that it is built on a much firmer foundation.