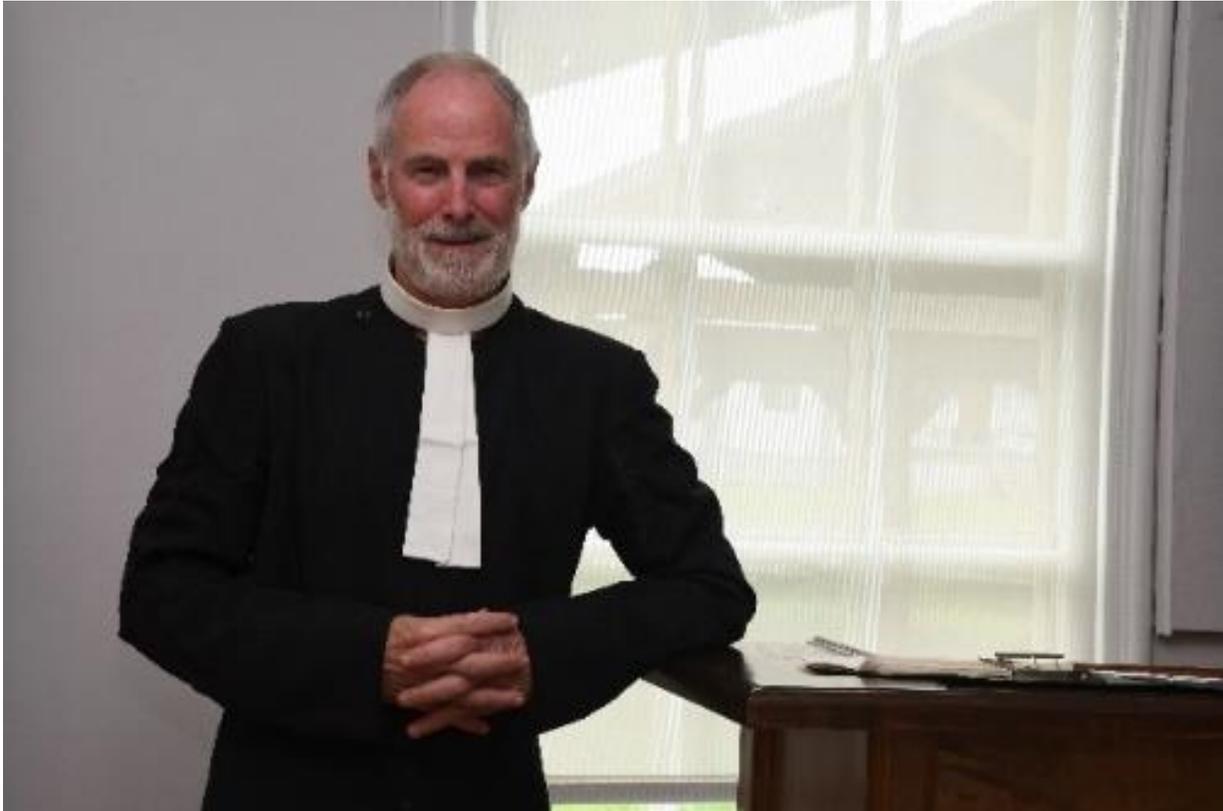


The Glengarry News

Churches of South Glengarry

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Malcolm "Mackie" Robertson graced the pulpit for a Tea Talk last week on the Churches of South Glengarry at the Glengarry Nor'Western Loyalist Museum.

Mr. Robertson is a seasoned United Church Licensed Lay Minister of almost three decades and a native of Bainsville where his family has lived for more than 100 years.

"I've always been interested in architecture, history and the stories behind our churches so that's why I decided to do this particular project," said Mr. Robertson.

The talk began with St. Lawrence Parish. The original structure was built in 1906 and eventually replaced with a new building in 1933. We heard of the Legrault family and how heavily involved they were in the church. So involved, that when Joe Legros was on his death bed, he paid off the church's mortgage going to show how important the parish was to his family and to the community.

Black Loyalists of Glengarry

South Glengarry's free Black United Loyalists "stayed loyal to Britain," he said. "When they came out with the Americans, they helped settle the land." Of the Black Loyalists, very little is known. However, there was one man named Cato Prime who was a staunch Presbyterian and worshipped with Rev. John Bethune at the home of Jacob Snider. Following Mr. Bethune's death

in 1815, Mr. Prime pledged money to hire a replacement minister from Scotland. Both Mr. Prime and his wife Catherine Bodet were buried on Mr. Snider's land which is now the St. Andrew's United Church cemetery in Lancaster where their graves can still be visited today.

Religious Conflicts and the Presbyterian Disruption

Mr. Robertson also told tales of the Presbyterian Disruption of the 1800s which made its way from Scotland to Glengarry. "Many didn't want the local lord or the equivalent of a bishop to choose their ministers, the parish wanted to pick their own ministers at their own time," said the lay minister. "As a result, there were often two Presbyterian churches in the same community. One would be a Presbyterian Church of Canada which was an off-shoot of the Scottish churches; and the other was the Free Church which ran its own affairs."

"Where you find our little Church on the Hill, there were once two churches: the Canadian Presbyterian and the old Presbyterian," he explained. "They were almost side by side and on summer evenings, they said, the ministers would argue. One would say, 'John 27:2 means such and such'; and the other minister would cry out 'No it doesn't!' But eventually they got their act together and built this church right here in 1833."

Mr. Robertson's presentation was well received by the audience who frequently broke into laughter throughout the talk. "I thought Mackie was absolutely wonderful," said Dr. Anna Williams. "The number of local churches, the histories behind them the stories Mackie was able to discover, I only wished I'd taken notes!"

Blessings from above

At the Anglican Church of St. John the Evangelist - also known as the Church in the Wildwood - we heard the story of Bill Bertle. Mr. Bertle, they say, was a parishioner and a bird fancier who regularly visited the bird sanctuary in Upper Canada to watch the Canada Geese. As the story goes, said Mr. Robertson, "the day they lay him in the ground at St. John's they looked up and there were geese flying overhead, so they said John Bertle had been blessed."

As the Lay Minister Robertson told the old stories, it was clear to all that the churches of South Glengarry had played a strong role in our common history and heritage, which they continue to do today.

Father Rudy Villeneuve: "a priest, educator, and a community man"

Mr. Robertson spoke of how South Glengarry's parishioners - regardless of which church they belonged to - supported each other in good times and in bad. Leading the way was Father Rudy Villeneuve. "Father Rudy Villeneuve," recalled Mr. Robertson fondly, "was a priest, educator, and a community man. He believed completely in the idea of an ecumenical community. Not to put one above the other simply to join as a community and worship in whatever form you wanted to."

According to the Lay Minister, these values can best be seen with Knox United Church in Lancaster. "Built in 1876, Knox has since had a remarkable transformation from a church to a community center, including a chapel," he explained. "One of the things that's really interesting about that project is that only about a quarter of the volunteers technically belong to the Presbyterian Church. There's Anglicans, Catholics, and non-affiliated people who help out there... Every fall is they have a little meeting and say they have x amount of dollars in bank and x amount to give away. In the last few years, they've given away around \$45,000." The money has gone to various charities over the years such as The Father Rudy Villeneuve Foundation, CHEO, Meals on

Wheels, and the Hospice. "So that's a wonderful way to turn back to the community," Mr. Robertson concluded.

MacDonald men: priests and warriors

Guests also heard tales of Father Alexander MacDonald who later became the bishop, and his good friend Reverend John Bethune who was also a chaplain. "Both of them were chaplains of the 2nd Glengarry Fencibles," said Mr. Robertson. "When Father MacDonald was talking to the young men in his community he said: 'You're all MacDonalds, any young men bearing the MacDonald name has to be either a priest or a warrior'. Now where that goes, is that Father Rory MacDonald who's from St. Raphael's is a chaplain, a piper and a military man," he said. "So the story is continuing."

If we don't share these stories "they will be lost," Mr. Robertson emphasized. "So all these funny little stories yes they are just little anecdotes but they tell us about our history, our communities and the people who lived there."

Preserving Heritage Places of Worship

Despite their value, South Glengarry's churches are at risk. "Many churches can't afford to keep up their buildings, particularly in some of the town churches where you can't rely on local free labour," explained Mr. Robertson. "A farm church, well there's usually someone who is pretty handy and can fix a door or put a new tin on the roof. But you go into a small town or city church and that becomes much more difficult. So they are facing big cost problems. Some of these churches are incredibly expensive to maintain."

Churches and other places of worship have faced many challenges over recent years such as dwindling congregations, shrinking revenues and rising costs, the costs of maintaining aging building, public safety and accessibility issues, real-estate pressures, as well as the need to adapt to new forms of worship and changing attitudes. "Unfortunately we are going to lose some," warned Mr. Robertson. "In the last 15 years, there's been probably at least a dozen churches closed."

Mr. Robertson hopes that these types of talks and community action will help in the conservation and protection of all types of heritage places of worship in Glengarry.

When asked what his plans for the future were, Mr. Robertson said, "This year it's the churches of South Glengarry; and this fall I will give another presentation to the Historical Society called the 'Churches of North Glengarry and their unique stories'."

Interest is already growing for Mr. Robertson's next lecture. "I heard it before and that's why I'm here today," said audience participant and Williamstown native Robert MacDonald. "I enjoy history and hearing about the churches in the area. Mackie did a great presentation. I'm looking forward to his next talk on the churches of North Glengarry."

The museum's popular Tea Talk series is held every Thursday afternoon at 2 pm during the summer season. Tomorrow's lecture will be on the 'Centennial of Women's Suffrage & Pink Tea,' presented by Joyce Lewis and Keleigh Goodfellow-Theoret. For more information, call 613-347-3547.