

Synod of Otago & Southland History Brief

There are many points in Scottish history that could be a starting point for the Synod of Otago and Southland. One of the most significant would be the decision by the Kirk Session of the Auchterarder Parish in Perthshire to refuse to accept the appointment of a minister by the Earl of Kinoull under the patronage system in 1835. They wanted to appoint their own minister under the notion of “call”.

The rejected minister appealed to the Court of Session, the secular High Court of Scotland. The Court ruled that the Kirk Session had acted illegally and furthermore that the established Church of Scotland (Presbyterian Church) was a state church governed by the laws of the land with the King as the head of state its head. This judgement brought to a head a theological and political argument within the Church of Scotland. A reforming group labelled as the “Evangelicals” argued that ministers are “called” by God and not appointed by Lords of the realm. The debate moved from the appointment of minister to who was the head of the Church of Scotland, Christ or the King.

At the 1843 General Assembly a concerted effort was made have the Assembly declare Christ as the sole head of the Church, but this failed. In reaction the then Moderator of the Assembly walked out taking 121 ministers with him. Eventually 475 of over 1200 left the establish Church of Scotland forming the Free Church of Scotland. The ministers and congregations who left walked away from their church buildings and manses into an uncertain future. This is called the “Disruption”.

At that time the New Zealand Company, a profit making enterprise, was “selling” settlement to New Zealand. An agreement was reached that Otago and Southland was to be settled by Free Church Scottish Presbyterians, in a similar deal the New Zealand Company “settled” Canterbury with Anglicans. But there was a big difference between the deals. The Lay Association of the Free Church brokered the deal with the New Zealand Company that 1/8th of the proceeds from the sale of land by the Company would be put in Trust for the building of churches, manses and education. That is better than a tithe! In other areas the 1/8th was distributed and spent without much accountability. So when the first two ships arrived in Otago Harbour in 1848 from Scotland the 1/8th began to accrue.

In 1852 The New Zealand Company went broke largely through speculative buying of land further north by people in England who had no intention of settling in New Zealand. In Otago and Southland a considerable fund has accumulated in Trust, but it took the Provincial Government with the Parliament in Auckland to get the money in a usable Trust. An Act of Parliament was passed entrusting the 1/8th money to what is now know as the Otago Foundation Trust Board. The Board administers the fund which has grown significantly through good government and management over the years.

Also in 1852, the Free Church in Otago and Southland for the Presbytery of Otago with direct links to the General Assembly Of the Free Church of Scotland. Meanwhile the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand was being established north of the Waitaki River with its links to the established Church of Scotland. In 1866, the Presbytery of Otago became independent from the Free Church in Scotland, forming the Synod of Otago and Southland, which became the General Assembly of the Free Church in New Zealand. 2016 is the 150th Anniversary of this event. The Synod established the Presbyteries of Dunedin, Clutha and Southland, later adding North Otago and Maitua. Also established was the “sister relationship” between the Otago Foundation Trust Board and the Synod of Otago and Southland. Today, the Otago Foundation Trust Board gifts proceeds from the Trust it administers under the guidelines of the Otago Foundation Trust Board Act 1992 to the Synod of Otago and Southland, who through its committee structure distributes those funds in the form of grants to parishes in the Synod area. Synod also supports theological education through the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership that is governed by PCANZ. Synod continues

to support aspects of the University of Otago as well as community groups who can apply for grants.

Soon after the arrival of the Free Church leaders in Dunedin conversations were started with the Presbyterian Church north of the Synod area because despite the Disruption most things were held in common. Eventually in 1901 the two Presbyterians Churches united under one General Assembly with Christ as the head of the Church. In the uniting, however, our canny forebears maintained the Synod of Otago and Southland in a special partnership with the General Assembly keeping exclusive its relationship with the Otago Foundation Trust Board, exclusive jurisdiction over church land and buildings in the Synod area, plus “ecclesial power” in certain matters where it can act as the General Assembly.