

CHURCH UNION AND THE PRESBYTERIANS OF GALT, ONTARIO

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Introduction

As one of the more noteworthy religious events in Canadian history, the so-called church union of 1925 has been the subject of much scholarly research and writing. Within the historiography of church union, moreover, the controversy and schism within the Presbyterian Church in Canada has been a dominant focus. Yet, for all the attention paid to the issues of church union in general and the Presbyterian disruption in particular, one complex and persistent question has always resisted an easy answer for serious students: why did so many Presbyterians, standing against their General Assembly, choose not to join The United Church of Canada? John Webster Grant, for example, has written that “the motives that led individuals to support or oppose union were so complex as to baffle anyone who attempts to analyze them”.¹ While admitting the genuine difficulty of the task, this paper will offer an answer to the above question that, though incomplete in and of itself, is able to shed some much-needed light on both how and why Presbyterians were divided by church union as well as the difficulties faced by those who have tried previously to understand this key aspect, or consequence, of the movement. Based on a close study of the four Presbyterian congregations of Galt (now Cambridge), Ontario—Knox’s, Central, St. Andrew’s and First—it will be shown that a great many Presbyterians were highly influenced in their decision about whether to join the United Church by interpersonal considerations. This thesis makes good sense of the evidence available and it also has the benefit of helping us understand the difficulties of making generalizations about church union, and the Presbyterian “disruption”, which are typically encountered.

Historians have often taken a keen interest in the large group of Presbyterians who stayed out of the United Church—anywhere from one third to one half of its members. Yet, in trying to understand the reasons for this development, the motivations of most individual Presbyterians have been inferred from the study of a few influential leaders. C.E. Silcox, for example, in his foundational *Church Union in Canada*, gleaned from the literature of the Presbyterian Church Association an extensive list of ideological reasons—including civil jurisprudence and theology—for the existence of a large dissenting minority. While he does acknowledge “local difficulties,” these are presented as an afterthought and as having more to do with post-schism

¹ John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (Burlington, ON: Welch, 1988), 109.

“community adjustments.”² Although other historians have sometimes disagreed with some of Silcox’s specific conclusions, their overall approach has been very similar.³

While the historiography of church union is often insightful, stimulating and helpful, two methodological difficulties have hindered ongoing progress. First, the surprising inconsistency and incoherence of participants’ arguments tend to defy generalization. Second, even acknowledging that prominent leaders did not always mean what they said, it is not clear that conclusions based on their experiences can be applied to the motivations of others. In fact, it is probably better to start from the assumption that, for various reasons, they should not be. This kind of inference, however, has been made consistently. This paper will show, conversely, that the experiences of Canadian Presbyterians can often be examined fruitfully at the congregational level and that, therefore, popular motivations do not have to be inferred so completely from the statements of prominent public figures or denominational leaders.

To this claim, it might be countered that a focus on local evidence has predetermined a parochial conclusion or that Galt’s diverse group of Presbyterians were collectively unique. This paper, however, does not seek to put their experiences in opposition to those of well-known individuals or to Presbyterians in other communities. Nor is it implied that intellectual arguments about church union were unimportant. Rather, the point is simply that we can and should study the experiences of Canadian Presbyterians in their congregational contexts, rather than simply inferring the choices of the many from the rhetoric of a few. This study will tell the stories of Galt’s Presbyterian congregations and, one hopes, demonstrate a method that can lead us to a richer and more nuanced understanding of how and why Canadian Presbyterians were divided by church union.

Church Union in Galt’s Presbyterian Churches

I. Knox’s Church

Knox’s, founded in 1844 as a Free Church, had called its first Canadian minister, R.E. Knowles, in 1898⁴ and it was during his tenure that the subject of church union was first broached. At an early stage, many in Knox’s believed that church union was a good idea for Kirk and country. When the Basis of Union was made available to congregations, in 1908, the Session offered a positive evaluation. We read in their Annual Report,

² C.E. Silcox, *Church Union in Canada: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Institute for Social and Religious Research, 1933), 197-213.

³ John Webster Grant, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union* (London: Lutterworth, 1967) and N. Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada: 1904-1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985).

⁴ Jean O’Grady, *Famous People Who Have Met Me: The Life and Interviews of R.E. Knowles* (Toronto: Colombo and Company, 1999), 1-11.

It is gratifying to observe the progress made toward organic union and to learn that all difficulties met with by the various committees are being overcome and that there is reason to hope that the great question will shortly be submitted to the congregation for their consideration.⁵

In March 1912, when Presbyterians across Canada were later asked to vote on two questions concerning church union—question one concerning church union in principle, question two the Basis of Union in particular—the result in Knox’s showed a clear majority in favour of both.⁶

	Question One		Question Two	
	For	Against	For	Against
Elders	21	4	17	3
Members	291	61	231	55
Adherents	21	3	16	3
Totals	333	68	264	61

In the years to come, however, congregational sentiment began to change. In February 1907, Knowles had been involved in a train derailment near Guelph in which several people were killed. While he escaped with relatively minor injuries, the experience led to his having a nervous breakdown. Away from work for several months immediately following the accident as well as for long stretches in subsequent years, he never fully regained his health and eventually resigned in January 1915.⁷ In September of that year, the congregation called J.K. Fraser as its minister and this decision led to a shift in both the sentiment and position of the congregation. A native of Prince Edward Island, Fraser had come back to Canada just that summer after thirteen years in Charleston, South Carolina—largely to take part in the resistance to church union.⁸ Having returned to Canada without yet having a call, he began his campaign against church union almost immediately after accepting one from Knox’s. As early as August 1916, for example, John Penman noticed an anti-union article of Fraser’s in *The Outlook* and wrote a letter to thank him, in which he also invited suggestions about an upcoming conference. Showing himself to be surprisingly familiar with the Canadian situation, Fraser replied, “The less Dr. Campbell and Dr. Scott have to say on the question, the better for us. I find men all over the church resent their attitude.”⁹ Soon after, Fraser wrote a telling letter to J.W. MacNamara,

⁵ Annual Report 1908, Knox’s (Galt) Presbyterian Church Archives.

⁶ “Vote of Knox on Church Union,” *Galt Daily Reporter*, 27 March 1912, 1.

⁷ O’Grady, *Famous People Who Have Met Me*, 17-21.

⁸ “Unanimous Call from Knox Church,” *Galt Daily Reporter*, 9 September 1915, 1.

secretary of the Presbyterian Church Association, in which he stated that “I came to Galt only last November and do not have our men yet.”¹⁰

In late 1915, Canadian Presbyterians were asked to vote again on the thorny question of church union. In Knox’s, the congregation returned another pro-union vote, but this time by a narrow margin.¹¹

	Question One	
	For	Against
Elders	18	4
Members	146	147
Adherents	6	9
Totals	170	160

The nation-wide results of this second referendum left the General Assembly in a difficult position—although a majority continued to favour church union, the opposition had grown. In response, the whole matter was set aside for several years. By 1923 at the latest, however, it was clear that church union would go forward and that it would split the Presbyterian Church.

When the Presbyterian Church Association began its final effort to keep the congregations in Galt and as many of their members as possible out of the United Church, Fraser became its leading spokesperson and organizer in the city. He was able to secure, for example, despite two previous rejections by the unionist Session of his own congregation, Knox’s building for an anti-union rally on 28 March 1923. Though the speakers that evening were well-known preachers, the meeting was something of a disaster for the Presbyterian Church Association. Atrocious weather had drastically limited attendance, while some overly-long addresses left no time for organizational work.¹² Only much later was a local executive committee formed.

An ongoing dispute between Fraser and unionist elders, meanwhile, was leading to a bitter conflict in Knox’s. At one point, we learn, Session meetings were deteriorating into four-hour arguments about church union.¹³ A key bone of contention was the door-to-door canvass conducted by the Women’s League in November in which they found an overwhelming

⁹ J.K. Fraser to John Penman, 4 August 1916, Presbyterian Church Association Papers, 1973-1003-2-11, Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives.

¹⁰ J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 17 August 1916, Presbyterian Church Association Papers, 1973-1003-2-11.

¹¹ “Two Churches for Union, One Against,” *Galt Daily Reporter*, 29 November 1915, 1.

¹² J.W. MacNamara to J.K. Fraser, 5 April 1923, Presbyterian Church Association Papers, 1973-1003-9-4.

¹³ “In Special Articles, Both Sides of Church Union in Galt Discussed,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 17 November 1924.

majority, 716-196, opposed to church union on the basis of the proposed legislation.¹⁴ Also controversial was a later anti-union rally held at Knox's. Although that event might have gone relatively unnoticed, those present passed an anti-union resolution and forwarded it to federal and provincial politicians.¹⁵ These two actions—the canvass and the resolution—triggered a strong response from local unionists. A pro-union rally was then held in Knox's, at the instigation of the Session, at which George Pidgeon was one of the speakers.¹⁶ Fraser complained to MacNamara that this was “an insult to me and the church.”¹⁷

Anti-unionists in Knox's responded by asking the Session for a congregational meeting on 16 December 1923, to discuss the proposed church union bill. Although against the idea, the elders thought they had no choice but to consent. Just a week later, however, they discovered that the meeting would not be used for mere conversation but to vote on a resolution against church union. In a pre-emptive strike, Session declared that no vote would be allowed at the upcoming meeting and even that they were in favour “of church union as embodied in the bill.”¹⁸ What followed this was an unsightly public dispute carried out in the local newspaper. In one instance, Fraser used a feature article to criticize publicly the Session for its whole approach to the issue.¹⁹

At the aforementioned congregational meeting of 16 December, a resolution was indeed passed—one that called the church union bill “coercive and destructive of the rights of religious liberty.” Afterward, anti-unionists began handing out ballots for a final congregational vote and most of the unionists present walked out. At a Session meeting two days later, the elders declared their “unqualified disapproval” with the congregational meeting and that the resolution passed was “of no validity whatever.”²⁰

Throughout 1924, Fraser continued to campaign against church union, even using his summer holiday to speak on the issue in Prince Edward Island. Yet, he and others soon recognized a need to scale back their efforts if there was to be a Knox's preserved for Presbyterianism. Since the controversial events of December 1923, the congregation had been bitterly divided and, in the words of one, “had known no peace.” Fraser's approach, in particular,

¹⁴ “Congregation of Knox Church is Opposed to Union,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 14 December 1923, 1.

¹⁵ “Strong Resolution Against Union Bill Presented,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 10 November 1923, 1.

¹⁶ “Church Union Advocates Present Case at Meeting in Knox Church,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 28 November 1923.

¹⁷ J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 19 November 1923, Presbyterian Church Association Papers, 1973-1003-9-4.

¹⁸ Session Minutes, 12 December 1923, Knox's (Galt) Presbyterian Church Archives.

¹⁹ “Dr. Fraser Speaks on the Situation in Knox Church in Church Union Matter,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 15 December 1923, 1.

²⁰ Session Minutes, 1923 December 18.

had grown too zealous for even many anti-unionists.²¹ In October, it was decided to cancel a planned anti-union rally as it was not, as Fraser said, “the psychological moment” for a meeting.²²

Unionists, on the other hand, increased their efforts at this stage. Former minister Knowles, ironically, was especially active. In a fascinating turn of events, he had regained his health and, in 1922, moved back to Galt and joined Knox’s as a member of the congregation. After re-marrying and traveling for a year with his new wife, he became a fixture in the congregation’s church union controversy. In particular, he infuriated Fraser by sitting in the front pew on Sunday mornings in order to take copious notes of the sermons.²³ At a pro-church union rally in December, 1924, Knowles even rose to present a point-by-point refutation of Fraser’s anti-union pamphlet: “Address to the Presbyterian Church, Alberton, PEI.”

When the final ballots were counted, in January 1925, Knox’s had decided, 540-363, to stay out of the United Church.²⁴ Subsequently, about 300 withdrew, 260 of whom went to First. While some had positive reasons for leaving Knox’s, most left because they had been pushed by their minister. In a pastoral letter to every member of the congregation, Fraser had written that if Knox’s voted for union,

Hundreds of its members will have been taken from the church of their birth and choice. Does this seem fair or right? Might it not be better for those whose consciences compel them to enter the United Church to find a church of this fellowship elsewhere?²⁵

Later, Knowles would write, “The cream of old Knox has come over to First...I might say that we are the whipped cream, and if we had not been whipped, we would not be here.”²⁶

The experience of church union was undoubtedly devastating for Knox’s. Fraser was forced to resign and upon the arrival of his successor, in 1927, the congregational history observed that there was, “no visible repair to the damage that had been wrought” and that “morale was at an all-time low.”²⁷ Although the remnant had secured their future as a

²¹ “In Special Articles, Both Sides of Church Union in Galt Discussed,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 17 November 1924.

²² J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 3 November 1924, Presbyterian Church Association Papers, 1973-1003-9-4.

²³ O’Grady, *Famous People Who Have Met Me*, 23-29.

²⁴ Session Minutes, 1925 February 8.

²⁵ “Pastoral Letter to the Members of Knox Church, Galt,” 1924, Church Union Collection, 83.063C, 19-441, United Church of Canada Archives.

²⁶ “Knowles and the Cream,” *Star Weekly*, 18 April 1925, 20.

²⁷ Constance Sanders, *Knox’s: 1869-1969* (Privately Published, 1969), 32.

Presbyterian congregation, ideological victory turned out not to be very satisfying in comparison to the high interpersonal costs involved.

II. Central Church

Central Church was formed largely by the vestige of Galt's Old Kirk following the Free Church controversy. From 1880 to 1914, its minister was Congregationalist James Dickson, a man of ecumenical spirit.²⁸ Having called a Congregationalist minister, Central seemed ripe for church union. Indeed, when the idea was first put to the people, in 1912, a large majority favoured it.²⁹

	Question One		Question Two	
	For	Against	For	Against
Elders	13	6	9	7
Members	272	75	209	56
Adherents	25	6	18	1
Totals	300	87	236	64

Following Dickson's retirement, in 1914, the congregation called M.B. Davidson. Unlike his predecessor, Davidson opposed church union. On the eve of the second referendum, the Session asked him to preach on the subject and, on that occasion, Davidson left no doubt about his position. While Jesus' words from John 17:21 and the elimination of overlapping in the West were presented as dubious arguments for church union, he suggested that the real issues to be weighed were the benefits of a merger with the Methodists versus a split within Presbyterianism. Not surprisingly, given this logic, the results of the 1915 vote showed a significant turnaround in the congregation.³⁰

	Question One	
	For	Against
Elders	13	13
Members	115	302
Adherents	9	19
Totals	147	334

²⁸ James Dickson, *History of the Central Presbyterian Church, Galt, Ont., 1856-1904* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1904).

²⁹ Session Minutes, 16 March 1912, Central Presbyterian Church (Cambridge, Ont.) fonds, 2000-8006, Microfilm Reel 1, Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives.

³⁰ "Two Churches for Union, One Against," *Galt Daily Reporter*, 29 November 1915, 1.

Despite their shared opposition to church union, neither minister nor congregation became very involved in resistance movements—the Presbyterian Church Association or the Women’s League. Continually rejecting calls for help from Fraser and MacNamara, Davidson was unwilling to do anything that might threaten congregational unity. Even following the resumption of the church union controversy in the early 1920s, Davidson withstood outside pressure to become involved. He wrote to MacNamara, “it would be unfair of me now to enter on active, organized opposition,” adding that the unity of the congregation was “The thing of supreme importance so far as my work as a minister goes.”³¹

By and large, the congregation was pleased to focus on the preservation of their “one big family.” Although the elders of Session were evenly divided on the church union issue, they insisted that no printed literature be distributed in Central.³² When MacNamara asked for the use of the building for a Presbyterian Church Association rally, in 1924, the Session responded,

We are of the opinion it will be better for the future of Central Church...if we as a church work within ourselves. Up to the present, we have had absolutely no feeling of bitterness, though we have quite a number in our church who favour church union. Our great desire is, if possible, to remain Presbyterian without a break in our ranks. We think we shall be more successful in this by not taking part in any outside meetings.³³

Ultimately, the people of Central voted against joining the United Church, 470-166. Although 60 left the congregation, the split was amicable. Departing Clerk of Session David Nairn, for example, was given a gift in honour of his service to the Sunday school.³⁴ Despite the withdrawal of some to the United Church, Central remained intact as a community. Its leaders achieved their goals because they understood the relational aspect of church union.

III. St. Andrew’s Church

In response to Galt’s rapid population growth, which followed the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Young People’s Society for Christian Endeavour at Central Church founded three satellite Sunday schools in 1891. One of these was very successful and grew into St.

³¹ M.B. Davidson to J.W. MacNamara, 4 December 1922, Presbyterian Church Association Papers, 1973-1003-7-4.

³² Session Minutes, 1923 October 19.

³³ William Linton to J.W. MacNamara, 31 October 1924, Presbyterian Church Association Papers, 1973-1003-11-6.

³⁴ “Presentation to David Nairn,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 25 February 1925, 1.

Andrew's Church. On 4 February 1916, the Presbytery of Guelph granted St. Andrew's the status of a mission charge and the congregation hired Knox College student J.D. Parks as a part-time minister. By October of that year, a large hall had been constructed and a Session formed.³⁵

In 1917, Parks graduated and accepted a call to Tilston, Manitoba. His successor was J.J. Lowe, a member of the congregation in nearby Hespeler. An interesting character, Lowe was a revivalist who had travelled extensively, with D.L. Moody and Billy Sunday among others, and who had only settled in the area after marrying a local woman. In August 1919, Lowe was ordained in the Presbyterian Church and called as a full-time minister at St. Andrew's.³⁶

Surprisingly, church union was not a pressing issue for this young congregation. As a visiting journalist noted, "The union question has been notable by its absence from the deliberations of officials and members in St. Andrew's."³⁷ Widely considered a "community church," most outsiders assumed that its Presbyterian identity was weak and that it would join the United Church. As an aid-receiving charge, further, the strong statistical trend would have been for St. Andrew's to enter union.³⁸ Contrary to expectations, however, the people of St. Andrew's were rather uninterested in the issue. Having literally to be nagged by Lowe to take a congregational vote in January 1925—entry into the United Church being automatic absent a vote—the congregation decided, by a margin of 114 to 40, to stay out of the United Church. Indeed, of those who voted for church union, only 2 withdrew.³⁹

The reasons for this response were the congregation's desire to remain together as well as the skilful leadership of an anti-unionist minister. Lowe was beloved by his parishioners, who called him "a veritable saint of God."⁴⁰ Had Lowe decided to join the United Church, the people would likely have followed him. Yet, his position was clear and firm. Lowe was known as one of the committed anti-unionists in the Presbytery and he insisted on a congregational vote at St. Andrew's, knowing that the absence of one made entry into the United Church automatic. The path of least resistance for St. Andrew's was to follow Lowe and continue to work within a familiar context.

³⁵ *Golden Anniversary: 1916-1966*, 1, St. Andrew's Galt Presbyterian Church (Cambridge, Ont.) fonds, 1982-4002-2-10, Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives.

³⁶ Presbytery Meeting Minutes, 18 January 1919, Presbyterian Church in Canada Presbytery of Guelph fonds, 79.143c, United Church of Canada Archives.

³⁷ "In Special Articles, Both Sides of Church Union in Galt Discussed," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 17 November 1924, 1.

³⁸ Silcox, *Church Union in Canada*, 282.

³⁹ "Vote on Union, Presbytery of Guelph," Church Union Collection, 83.063C, 10-225/226.

⁴⁰ *Golden Anniversary: 1916-1966*, 3.

IV. First Church

First was formed in 1822 during the visit of an itinerant American preacher of the Associate Reformed Church, Thomas Beveridge. Although Galt’s first settlers belonged to the Church of Scotland, they were so grateful for Beveridge’s visit that they joined his denomination.⁴¹ In 1907, First severed its American ties and joined the Presbyterian Church in Canada.⁴²

In 1907, the congregation also called its first Canadian minister, H.J. Pritchard. At that time, he and many others were already hoping for church union. After a first look at the Basis of Union, the Session declared “the ‘Interim Report’ of the committee on union of the churches presents a very satisfactory basis for union.”⁴³ In 1912, the referendum showed a large majority in favour of church union.⁴⁴

	Question One		Question Two	
	For	Against	For	Against
Elders	10	0	8	0
Members	137	15	124	13
Adherents	1	0	0	0
Totals	148	15	131	13

In May 1912, Pritchard accepted a call to Sault Sainte Marie and was replaced in the summer by K.J. MacDonald. When it came time for a second referendum, MacDonald advocated church union from the pulpit, arguing that the churches in Western Canada needed union and that its proposed constitution—the Basis of Union—was theologically and practically sound. It was the unionists, for him, who were the loyal Presbyterians, not their opponents.⁴⁵ Again, First showed its overall support for church union.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Andrew W. Taylor, *Banners Unfurled: The History of First United Church, 1824-1949* (Galt, ON: The Galt Printers, 1949).

⁴²Session Minutes, 21 May 1907, First United Church (Cambridge, Ont.) fonds, 95.122L, 4-7, United Church of Canada Archives.

⁴³ Session Minutes, 1909 January 2.

⁴⁴ Session Minutes, 1912 February 28.

⁴⁵ “Minister Discusses Church Union Question,” *Galt Daily Reporter*, 8 November 1915, 1.

⁴⁶ “Two Churches for Union, One Against,” *Galt Daily Reporter*, 29 November 1915, 1.

Question One

	For	Against
Elders	14	2
Members	114	45
Adherents	5	0
Totals	133	47

When the church union issue reappeared, in the 1920s, controversy was essentially absent from First and its few opponents within the congregation did not get actively involved in outside resistance movements. On 1 November 1924, the Session met to discuss church union and to arrange for a final congregational vote. Clerk of Session A.B. Scott was asked to make available a selection of literature from both sides while MacDonald, for his part, continued to advocate church union, both publically and privately.

While debate over the church union issue had caused little controversy in First, its actual consummation led to much anguish. After the congregation voted to join the United Church, 216 to 128, 55 withdrew while 268 arrived, mostly from Knox's.⁴⁷ In April, Knox College Principal Alfred Gandier was invited to fill the pulpit and offer his encouragement. The Session made note of his "very helpful sermon," which "reassured" the people of their decision.⁴⁸ On 31 May, the Session called a special meeting at which MacDonald was urged to make a statement, "strongly expressing to those who voted against church union that it is the earnest wish of the Session, Managers and Minister that they remain in First Church." Also telling was the Session's decision to suspend the usual practice of sharing summer services with the neighbouring Methodist congregation. Although the people of First were on the verge of joining them in the United Church, the elders felt "It would not be in the best interests of the church to hold joint services with the Wesleyan Ainslie Street Church during the holiday season."⁴⁹

Amazingly, the Session also decided not to hold a joint service with the former Methodists to mark the birth of the United Church. On 11 June, Wesley United Church held such a service by themselves with only a handful from First in attendance: MacDonald, two recent transfers from Knox's and a couple in the joint choir.⁵⁰ It was not until the next Sunday, 14 June, that First held a church union service of its own. On that occasion, Pine Hill Divinity Hall Principal Clarence MacKinnon was the guest preacher and the Session made note of his "very

⁴⁷ "Vote on Union, Presbytery of Guelph," Church Union Collection, 83.063c, 10-225/226.

⁴⁸ Session Minutes, 1925 April 26.

⁴⁹ Session Minutes, 1925 May 31.

⁵⁰ "Inaugural Service in Celebration of Church Union in Galt," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 12 June 1925, 1.

helpful and inspiring sermon,” which had “practical and spiritual lessons having a very direct bearing on the present crisis in the church.”⁵¹

In the long run, church union provided an emotional and economic boost at First. In 1929, for example, an impressive and long-contemplated Christian Education wing was completed to house the Sunday school of nearly 400. MacDonald, a unionist partisan further, was able to remain happily until his retirement, in 1932. Nonetheless, the relational costs of church union proved very high. For a congregation who had joined the Presbyterian Church in Canada largely because of church union, the intellectual aspects of the issue were revealed, in the end, to be relatively minor concerns.

Conclusion

A lot of serious thought has obviously been given to the possible reasons why the Presbyterian Church in Canada split over church union, especially to the statements of leading participants in the controversy. As Grant noted, though, “public statements do not always tell very much about actual motives.”⁵² Reading between the lines, he and N. Keith Clifford have concluded, in similar ways, that anti-unionists opposed the creation of an unnecessarily large religio-political institution and its achievement at the cost of religious liberty.⁵³ While both have done brilliant work and are leading names in the field, neither has moved far beyond a reinterpretation of the intellectual arguments made by a relatively small number of prominent figures. Although their studies are very helpful and often convincing, the sheer diversity of church union experiences among Canadian Presbyterians still resists, in my view, such broad generalization and begs a more nuanced approach. Notably, on the other hand, the few localized studies of church union have, to date, repeatedly highlighted the presence of significant regional diversity across the country. In Western Canada, for example, where a relative uniformity of support for church union was long assumed, Clifford himself found remarkable dissimilarities that point in just the opposite direction.⁵⁴ In the Maritimes, also, it has been shown that Presbyterians in Prince Edward Island and Pictou County, Nova Scotia, responded in unique ways to differing local circumstances.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Session Minutes, 1925 June 14.

⁵² Grant, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union*, 52.

⁵³ Grant, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union*, 53-54 and Clifford, *Church Union in Canada*, 1ff.

⁵⁴ N. Keith Clifford, “Church Union and Western Canada,” In *Prairie Spirit: Perspectives on The Heritage of The United Church of Canada in the West*, edited by D.L. Butcher *et al.*, 283-295. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985).

⁵⁵ Tim F. Archibald, “Remaining Faithful: Church Union 1925 in the Presbytery of Pictou,” *Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Papers* (1990): 20-38, and James Cameron, “The Garden Distressed: Church Union and Dissent on Prince Edward Island, 1904-1947” (Ph.D. dissertation, Queen’s University), 1989.

What explains the presence of such bewildering diversity as we find consistently in any study of the Presbyterian schism? Admitting the extreme difficulty we face in trying to understand the internal reasons why individual Presbyterians supported or opposed church union or of making helpful inference from an extremely complicated body of statistical evidence, as attempted by John A. Ross,⁵⁶ it seems more methodologically helpful to examine, among a small sample such as this one has provided, why some individuals did, or did not, join the United Church. In other words, it is votes cast with feet, rather than with secret ballots or public rhetoric, which are most telling and significant. In light of this methodological distinction, it becomes clear, from a close study of the Galt congregations, that personalities and relationships made the difference for many Presbyterians.

In his grand study, Silcox himself noted the role of “local difficulties” around church union, especially the minister’s “method and manner” as well as other unique congregational dynamics.⁵⁷ Clifford also, who saw in common a shared defence of religious liberty among anti-union activists, pointed to local influences, such as wealth and social identity, which were distinct in each congregation.⁵⁸ Both, however, preferred ultimately to emphasize other motivating influences upon Canadian Presbyterians, especially ideological ones. Grant, similarly, concluded that “most people stood by their individual convictions...breaking up not only congregations but personal friendships and family loyalties.”⁵⁹ It is true, of course, that broader intellectual issues cannot be dismissed in an examination of church union at any level. Many Presbyterians supported or opposed church union for a variety of theological, historical or other reasons and chose their path accordingly. Nor can we dismiss the national context of the event. Church union was a nation-wide movement and the motives of both its supporters and detractors can only be understood in light of that fact. However, once the church union process was put in motion and the public debate framed, personal relationships became a major concern for a great many people in Canada’s Presbyterian congregations.

In Galt, the realignment of the city’s Presbyterian community, which came about because of church union, was clearly shaped much more by interpersonal considerations than by ideological ones. In this short paper, we have seen the particular importance and influence of congregational leadership—both lay and ordained. It has not been practical in these pages, unfortunately, to discuss the significant influence on many individuals played by kinship ties, which we know to have been important as well. A perusal of the meeting minutes for the Sessions of the various Galt churches, for example, makes clear that movement between congregations was generally made by families, even extended ones, together. In such cases, there

⁵⁶ John A. Ross, “Regionalism, Nationalism and Social Gospel Support in the Ecumenical Movement of Canadian Presbyterianism” (Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University), 1973.

⁵⁷ Silcox, *Church Union in Canada*, 212.

⁵⁸ Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada*, 4.

⁵⁹ Grant, *The Canadian Experience of Church Union*, 51.

may have been a matriarch or patriarch who made an intellectual decision about church union, but the other family members generally followed because of the personal connection.⁶⁰ In light of all this evidence, it seems only reasonable to conclude that such congregational experiences as we have looked at here were shared widely, in some form, in other communities across Canada. By recognizing this, we are in a much better position to understand both how and why Canadian Presbyterians were divided by church union in the extremely complex way that they were.

⁶⁰ John Thompson Taylor, for example, a missionary to India from Knox's, led his large extended family from Knox's to First at the time of church union. He was an intellectual proponent of church union, but the majority of his clan joined the United Church because of his position in the family, not the arguments he espoused. Personal Conversation with Alex Taylor, 7 May 2006. For more on his influence, see John Thompson Taylor to Editor, *Galt Evening Reporter*, 5 January 1925, 3 and a letter from "Mother" to "Bairnies", dated 16 July 1925, Taylor Family fonds, 87.307c, 1-1, The United Church of Canada Archives .