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Early Days of the Congregational Church in St. John's.

The following sermon was preached by Rev. D. L. Nicholl at the Congregational Church on Sunday evening:

In an earlier study we traced the story of the founding of our Church—the building, of course, but the religious society—by John Jones in 1775. We saw some of the difficulties and oppositions by which he and his friends were faced. We know that he triumphantly surmounted them all, that under his wise leadership the little cause grew in numbers and influence. And when in the year 1800, after an active ministry of 25 years, John Jones passed away, it was to the grief and regret of the whole community, so thoroughly had he earned and won the respect and affection of all the citizens. Not the least sincere mourners at his death were some of those who in the early days had most bitterly opposed him and sought to bring his work to naught; and have him expelled from the country.

But we are not to understand that all difficulties ceased after the successful formation of the church and the building of the first meeting-house. There were difficulties and problems all the way through—some from without and some from within. The whole of that first quarter of a century was a time of stress and strain. And the more we read of the earlier history of those years the more we appreciate the Christian character of Mr. Jones, his patience, perseverance, charity and fairness; the more also we realize the indomitable courage and loyalty of those humble men and women who formed his little flock.

In our last study we saw how the first real home of the Church in a building of its own was the meeting-house erected in 1777—at the foot of what is now Victoria Street. We learned of the rage of the then Governor, Admiral Montagu, when he arrived from England and found a "dissenting chapel" in the town, and of his threat to pull the place to pieces. But as the building stood on which the Governor could not carry out the threat. Although this effort to injure the cause failed, another effort made two, and a half years later was more successful. On his return from England in 1779 as an ordained minister Mr. Jones sought from the Magis-

trates a license to preach. One of the two Magistrates, Mr. Gill, gave a hearty consent. The other, the Rev. Edward Langman, who was also the Church of England clergyman in St. John's, refused, and threatened that if Jones ventured to preach in public he would send constables to stop him. This did not intimidate Jones or the Church! The members assembled for worship as hitherto, and John Jones led the worship and preached the gospel of redeeming grace. A further letter came from Langman in the most emphatic terms ordering Jones to cease from preaching or he would be visited with the utmost penalties of the law! The minister and elders determined to bring the matter before a higher authority, they would "appeal to Caesar"—Caesar in their case being represented by the Governor. Accordingly they did so. The Governor received Jones and the two elders who accompanied him in the cabin of his ship with violent and abusive language and forbade him in the sternest terms to continue public services in their meeting-house—Jones might do what he liked in his own lodgings but he must not preach in public! The appeal to Caesar failed!

Forbidden to worship in public how could a Church of Christ be built up? It seemed like the end of everything and for once Jones was thoroughly disheartened. What could he do? It seemed as though the door to service in St. John's had been shut in his face, and not only shut, but banged, barred and bolted! In his disappointment he actually proposed returning to England. But the church members would not hear of retreat—they were not going to be beaten; they would not give in; they would not suffer the cause of Christ to be crushed out of existence by any man! They were of the same stuff as the Apostles. They thanked God that they were counted worthy to suffer for the Name's sake; they said they must obey God rather than man. Seeing their faith and courage the heart of Jones was made strong and glad within him. He gave up the idea of returning to England and pledged himself anew to the immediate task which claimed him.

For the moment the Church yielded to the order of officialism. But they only retreated in order to prepare for a big advance; they only drew back

a little in order to take a great leap forward! So for a time the little house of God, erected with such joy and hope and at such a sacrifice, stood empty and derelict. It was no longer filled with the sound of praise or echoed to the glorious promises of the gospel. But the Church itself went on. The little company met as they had done at the very beginning four years previously in the lodgings of their minister. But there was no break in the continuity. Just as the early Christians in Rome were forced by persecution away from the light of day, underground to the catacombs, so his little company was forced by illegal and arbitrary persecution from worship in public to worship in private: from the House of God to the house of John Jones. Ah! but the house of John Jones became to them none other but the House of God and the very gate of Heaven!

But they were not content to meet thus in secret. They were not altogether without resources. They were British subjects, and if justice could not be obtained in Newfoundland then it could be obtained in England. And in England they had friends, even powerful friends. And to them they turned for help in this time of trial. They wrote a letter to the great Evangelical Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge, laid their case before the officials of the society and begged them to take up their injured cause.

This S. O. S. was sent off in the late summer and they had to wait until the following spring, 1780, for an answer. And all that time they continued their services without a break. They were a persecuted Church—but as so often has happened in history "the blood of the martyrs has been the seed of the Church" and times of persecution have been times of growth. So it was here. In the records of this time I find the entry "The Lord was pleased to add unto them."

The Governor, while he might be an autocrat in Newfoundland, was himself subject to authority in England. And when that distinguished divine, the Rev. Dr. Sifford, one of the officials of the Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge, waited upon him in London, His Excellency was most accommodating. The persecution of the Independent Church in St. John's was not his doing, not at all! It was all due to the jealousy and bigotry of Mr. Langman, magistrate and clergyman. On his return to Newfoundland he would take steps to keep Langman in his place and also see that Jones and his congregation were reinstated in their building. "To his credit he carried out his word and in August 1780 the congregation re-took possession of their meeting-house with great joy and gladness of heart seeing that the Lord had done such good things for them."

That is one example of the persecution to which our fathers were subjected—persecution by the authorities. It is not to be wondered at that the rough and rowdy elements followed the example of their social betters. Even officers of His Majesty's navy from ships in the harbour thought it fine sport to disturb the dissenters at their prayers. Their favourite diversion seems to have been dropping gunpowder down the chimney of the church, at the imminent risk of explosion and fire. Thus encouraged, the rabble of the town took a hand in the game. One night they wrenched the shutters off their hinges, smashed all the windows and did much other damage. Baiting the dissenters was a favourite amusement! Once there was quite a riot. "The lewd fellows of the baser sort" attacked the building with stones, did much destruction and more or less seriously injured members of the congregation. The authorities were compelled to interfere. The ringleaders of the mob were identified, brought to trial and condemned to be flogged. Here Jones showed his Christian spirit of forgiveness and goodwill, he interceded with the magistrates on behalf of the prisoners and proved that the sentence might not be carried out. He harboured no hatred against the men, he had no anger for them, only pity, and at his intercession the men were liberated.

This incident seems to have marked the end of the period of bitter persecution. A new Governor, John Campbell, Esq., a Scotsman and a very different man from his predecessor, arrived in St. John's. He was very favourably inclined toward the Dissenting Church; he saw and approved all Mr. Jones' efforts for the spiritual and moral improvement of the people. His attitude and protection restrained the more violent forms of persecution. Says the old record, "His conduct was beyond expression—gentle, mild and good-natured," and in answer to an address from the Church he declared "that so far from preventing he would do all in his power to further it."

All the way through the arch-persecutor had been Edward Langman, the magistrate. His hatred had been as implacable as it was unreasonable. His efforts to injure Jones and his work had been prompted by a jealousy that was almost insane. Poetic justice was meted out to him. In 1784 in circumstances of great disgrace, he was dismissed from all his public offices and was an object of contempt to the entire population. Under the indignity his pride was broken, probably also his heart, for he died very soon after. Henceforth the little church was free, with but little interruption, to develop along its own lines. It steadily grew in numbers and influence. But

increasing prosperity did not breed spiritual pride, for we find many references to "days of humiliation and fasting before the Lord."

In the light of the recent educational advance made in this Colony by the inauguration of the Junior University College, it is not without interest to discover that the Independent Church was one of the pioneers of education in this city. For in the year 1786 there is a reference to the school kept by Mr. Jones in the vestry of the church—a school of 20 scholars. At the time it was the only school in St. John's apart from one conducted by the Roman Catholic priests who had been allowed to settle and build a church and school in 1784.

Although the Church increased greatly in numbers it was never, in Jones' time, rich in this world's goods. Many of the congregation, moreover, were only "birds of passage," coming over here in the summer for the fishery and returning to England at the close of the season, for those were days when permanent residence in the island was discouraged. The Governor himself only resided here during the fishing season and returned home every fall. During the winter months the numbers of the little flock must have been very small, and it was a great strain on them to maintain the cause and keep it free from debt. Indeed, they would not have been able to do this but for the generous help from England. From the very beginning right on to the present moment this Church has been associated with those of our faith and order in England and not with those in America or Canada. And to-day the missionary work initiated by the Church in Fortune Bay just 50 years ago, and so ably carried on by Rev. Hugh Macdonald for the past 21 years, is almost entirely financed by the English Colonial Missionary Society. And however desirable on grounds of policy and even of principle, affiliation with the United Church of Canada may be, ties of sympathy lasting 150 years link us very closely to the Congregational Churches of the Motherland. Our outlook is toward the East rather than toward the West. The ties which bind us to English Congregationalism can only be broken, and that very reluctantly, at the bidding of a higher loyalty.

In view of the fact that the majority of the Protestant population of the country is of West of England stock, it is only natural to find that in the early years there existed the closest connection possible in the circumstances between this Church and the Independent Churches of Devonshire and Dorsetshire. Many of the masters of the fishing vessels coming here year after year were sturdy Independents, and to their home churches in the West Country they told the story of this Church, its difficulties and its needs. A generous response was the result—gifts of books and magazines for winter reading as well as gifts of money were constantly arriving. By the living sympathy and spirit of fellowship, of which these gifts were the outward expression, the Church in St. John's lost its sense of isolation, for behind it were the spiritual and material resources of the home churches. Some of them ought to be mentioned by name—Wareham, Sherborne and Poole in Dorsetshire, Teignmouth and Plymouth in Devonshire. Without their practical help this Church could not, humanly speaking, have survived its infancy. Perhaps the greatest individual friend the Congregational Church in St. John's ever had on the other side was the Rev. Dr. Samuel Greathead of Newport Pagnell in Cambridgeshire, where he was tutor in the Academy for the Education of Congregational Ministers. It was to him more than any other that Mr. Jones and his people turned for counsel in all their difficulties, and when Jones died it was to Dr. Greathead that his Church turned to find their successor. He was also instrumental in obtaining for the cause many hundreds of pounds from sympathizers in England. Never once did he fail them.

Of the early years of the Church the most striking features are—

1. The steadfastness and loyalty of the little persecuted flock.
2. The practical sympathy and help of the home churches in England.

We to-day should be proud of the spirit in which those who went before us met and conquered opposition, and we may still be grateful to the Congregationalism of the Old Country for the help and support which have been so generous and so continuous.

Our fathers were high-minded men who firmly kept the faith: To freedom and to conscience true, In danger and in death;

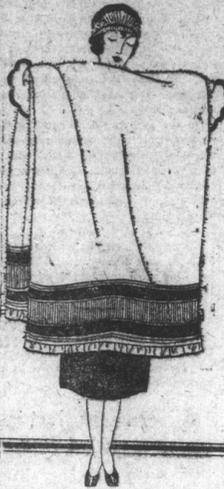
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" 54 x 70.	Reg. \$ 7.60 pair.	Special Price \$ 6.50
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" 66 x 88.	Reg. \$12.70 pair.	Special Price \$11.35
" 70 x 88.	Reg. \$14.50 pair.	Special Price \$13.90
" 82 x 85.	Reg. \$15.45 pair.	Special Price \$14.75
" 75 x 90.	Reg. \$18.10 pair.	Special Price \$16.25
" 84 x 90.	Reg. \$19.80 pair.	Special Price \$17.75

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Special Services

The second Sunday in October will be observed at St. Mary's Church, Routhside, as Church Workers' Sunday, when special services will be conducted during the day. The third Sunday of the month will be Young People's Sunday, when there will be special services, and at 8 p.m. an address by Rev. Dr. Fahey.

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