

From These Roots.....

It is an honour for me to speak to you this morning, at this anniversary Sunday service, on the early roots of our congregation. I have decided not to give you a traditional recounting of how the congregation was first established or how it has grown and changed over the past 116 years. Rather, I thought that I would relate how Gaetz Church started and how it has developed by describing the lives of some of those who have played a significant role in this congregation or have made a very significant contribution to the United Church as a whole.

There is, of course, a danger to such an approach. There have been hundreds who over the years have done a great deal for our church and our community. By singling out a few, one overlooks many. Moreover, this approach can be misinterpreted as ignoring, snubbing, or worse, denigrating the contributions and accomplishments of many very worthy members of this church.

Nevertheless, one should be fearless when speaking in church, I hope that my few examples will still give some sense of the dynamism and diversity of those who have made up Gaetz Church, and a sense of the truly remarkable achievements which have been a part of the founding and nurturing of this congregation. That is, of course, dependent upon my not wrapping my tongue firmly around my teeth or droning on for too long a time.

In the book of Genesis, we find the accounts of the patriarchs. Therefore, I will start with one of our patriarchs and the original namesake of this church, Reverend Leonard Gaetz.

He was truly one of the most remarkable men to have lived in this community, a pioneer, promoter and builder. He is a man about whom much had been written, but also a man about whom a certain amount of myth has developed. He was a person who left a lasting legacy for this church, for this community, for this province and for our nation.

Leonard Gaetz was born on June 7, 1841 in Musquodoibit Nova Scotia. He was one of the twelve children of Leonard Gaetz and Catherine Henritcy. His father was an energetic farmer and miller who was also involved in the coastal trade to earn a little more money. The family were strong Methodists and also strong believers in education.

In 1855, Leonard and his brother Joseph were sent to Acadia University in Wolfville to further their education. The family did not have much money, so Leonard and Joseph walked barefoot to Wolfville, carrying their boots over their shoulders to save on shoe leather. They also camped along the trail so as to avoid the expense of overnight lodgings.

Leonard proved to be a good student, despite some weakness in his earlier country school education. He decided to concentrate on theological studies, at which he did very well. He also quickly earned a reputation as an excellent speaker.

In 1861, he went out as a student minister with the Methodist Church, serving in both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. On July 14, 1865, he married Caroline Hamilton of Selma, Colchester County near Truro Nova Scotia. She was an exceptionally bright and talented young woman, who had enjoyed the rare

opportunity, for women in those times, of attending Acadia University as an arts and music student.

Shortly thereafter, Leonard accepted a posting to Musquodoboit Harbour and soon afterwards, Caroline and he began their large family which would eventually total 13 children, 11 of whom made adulthood.

Although Leonard was a country charge preacher, he soon stood out. On July 1, 1867, he was asked to be one of the featured speakers at the Confederation celebrations in Halifax. He moved around various charges in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, before accepting a call to First Methodist in Montreal. This was to be the pinnacle of Leonard Gaetz's ministerial career, as he had become the minister of one of Canada's most prominent churches. However, the nervous stress and strain of this work began to take a toll and his health began to break down.

In 1878, the Gaetz's moved to John Street Church in Hamilton. While there, they took up a rather poor quality farm near the City, a diversion that Leonard found quite reinvigorating. There is always something therapeutic about nurturing living things and helping them grow.

In 1881, Leonard had recovered enough to accept a new position, at the Queen's Avenue Church near London Ontario. Unfortunately, while there, he suffered a complete breakdown and was forced to leave the ministry.

From the pinnacle of his career, Gaetz had now plunged to the nadir. He moved back to the little farm near Hamilton, trying to recover his health. He also struggled as to how to establish a new livelihood for his large family, as the farm was not productive enough to provide a sufficient income.

At was at this point that Leonard Gaetz made a decision which was to profoundly change and improve the his life and the well-being of his family. A group of prominent Ontario Methodist businessmen had decided to create a land and colonization company, the Saskatchewan Land and Homestead Company which would help to settle Canadian and British Methodists in Western Canada and also take advantage of the great investment potential of the new land. The Company bought 180 sections of land or more than 115,000 acres in and around Red Deer. John T. Moore, the Company's managing director, recognizing Leonard Gaetz's many talents and need to find a new livelihood, recruited Gaetz to become the local agent for the company in Central Alberta.

In April 1884, the Gaetz's moved west from Hamilton to Red Deer. They were delighted to leave as the winter in Ontario had been one of the harshest on record and spring had been very late in coming. Conditions across Northern Ontario and Manitoba continued to be cold and snowy, but as they came farther west, the weather began to improve markedly. When they arrived in Alberta, the local settlers told them that they had already had three to four weeks of excellent spring weather and spring plowing had already begun.

Moreover, the land, which had been selected as their farm, was exceptionally rich. The sparkling broad river ran just to the north and there were beautiful spruce, poplar and willow trees lining the river and creek banks and on the hillsides which surrounded the valley. There was already a cozy log cabin on the property which had been built by a previous settler.

Leonard Gaetz would later write that in looking at the “delightful prospects all around him” that it was difficult to think that the land was in “a condition primeval”. He stated that if some Rip Van Winkle were to suddenly awake among such surroundings, it would appear that the buildings and fences had been mysteriously removed and that the beautiful bluffs in the distant landscape were the orchards and ornamental trees among which stately residences had once rested. To him, the smooth symmetrical slopes had the appearance of having once been the fruitful fields of a departed race of agricultural princes.

In other words, for the Gaetz’s, they had traveled across the wilderness to a new Promised Land.

The following months seemed to confirm their good fortune. The land broke easily and the grains and vegetables were soon springing out of the ground. The weather remained warm and wet. Hard frosts did not hit until early November. The first harvest was truly bountiful.

The family and particularly Leonard were invigorated by the new life. Almost as a symbol of the new life and the new hope for the future, Caroline and Leonard were blest with a new son Jack, in the latter part of September.

Leonard Gaetz soon developed a widespread reputation as an outstanding farmer. The size, quality and yield of the vegetables and grain were noteworthy and soon won prizes at various agricultural shows. However, his eldest son once complained that this wonderful accomplishment came after much backbreaking labour by the children who were required to meticulously tend the fields and gardens.

Leonard Gaetz soon branched out into business. He bought a store and post office at the Red Deer Crossing settlement and gave it to his son Raymond to run. He also bought a small sawmill and set up a lumbering business. Leonard prospered so quickly that by 1886, only two years after his arrival, he was able to travel back to Ontario to purchase more farm implements, machinery and livestock including a purebred Durham Bull.

Leonard Gaetz took advantage of the trip to promote the Red Deer district for settlers. It was part of his job with the Saskatchewan Land and Homestead Company, but he also genuinely believed in the area. His eloquence also went a long way to boost the prospects of this area. After one speech in Calgary, the Herald reported that Leonard’s speech was worthy of being engraved with pens of iron into plates of brass. Nevertheless, sometimes his speeches were very lengthy – one went to 4 a.m. Sometimes, his eloquence verged into hyperbole and exaggeration. He once claimed that hailstorms were virtually unknown in Central Alberta.

Nevertheless, Gaetz was an effective promoter and attracted a great many new settlers to the area. Quite understandably, many of the first people he attracted to Red Deer were other members of the family. So many Gaetz’s settled in this community that there was even a little rhyme made up about them:

There’s a Gaetz on every corner
 There’s a Gaetz on every stair
 If balloons become the fashion
 There will be Gaetz’s in the air.

One of the Gaetz's to come here in 1886 was one of Leonard's older brothers, Issac. He had been a lay preacher in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Upon arriving in Red Deer, he began to organize a local Methodist congregation. Leonard had been so busy with establishing his farm, starting his business ventures and promoting the district, that in two years, he had only preached two services, one of which was to an encampment of Stoney Indians at the old Red Deer Crossing.

Issac picked up the slack and began organizing services in his home, at his brother's house and at various other settlers' homes as well as at Fort Normandeau at the Crossing. By March 1887, a nucleus of a congregation had been built up sufficiently to allow an application to the Conference to have a student missionary sent to the community. In July 1887, William A. Vrooman arrived, started a circuit of regular services and also acted as the first schoolteacher when Red Deer's first public school officially began operations in September 1887.

If the role of Issac Gaetz as the primary founder of this congregation has often been overlooked in our church's history, so too has the role of Leonard's wife Caroline. As mentioned before, she was a very gifted and intelligent woman with an arts and music degree from Acadia University. Her musical talents had been invaluable as the organist at many of the country churches where her husband served. Moreover, she had the enormous challenge of giving birth to 13 children over a 20-year period, raising the 11 who lived. There were the many physically exhausting chores of running a home and farm. When her husband's health broke down, first in Montreal and later in London, Caroline had the job of both nursing her husband and trying to make ends meet. In other words, she did not fit the traditional Victorian view of a helpmate and assistant. She was very much full partner for her husband and a lead guide for her family.

When the family made the big move to Red Deer in 1884, Caroline Gaetz was pregnant. She was in the latter months of her pregnancy in the arduous days of putting in the first garden and then starting the first harvest.

However, her spirit and stamina stood up. Although it was bulky and hard to ship, she ensured that her organ was one of the family possessions to be moved out from Hamilton. She spent many a family evening and Sunday morning service playing hymns and other songs. It gave her great pleasure when William Vrooman arrived as he was also a talented musician and violinist. She now had someone to do duets with at Sunday service and community gatherings.

William A Vrooman left in the fall of 1887, but the congregation continued with services conducted by Issac Gaetz, Leonard Gaetz and various student missionaries or sky pilots sent out by the Conference and Methodist Missionary Society. The little log school also continued in operation when Leonard Gaetz's nephew and son-in-law, George Wilbert Smith, agreed to be the teacher until such time as another permanent teacher could be hired.

A great change for the community occurred in 1890 when Leonard Gaetz was able to entice the Calgary-Edmonton Railway to establish a new townsite in the Red Deer valley by offering the company an undivided half interest in his farm. This was a very shrewd move as not only did it bring the railroad and a townsite to this part of Central Alberta, but also every time a lot was sold, half the proceeds went to

the C. &E and half went to Leonard Gaetz. Thus, a foundation was set for him to become a wealthy man, in sharp contrast to the virtual penniless state the family was in prior to coming west to Alberta.

With the new townsite, there were quickly plans for a new church. Land was set aside on the north side of Blowers (51st) Street. Construction began in the middle of May 1892 and the building was ready for the dedication on Sunday June 26th. While the structure was relatively small, it still provided seating for 200. There were two church services held on the 26th with Leonard Gaetz representing the congregation's trustees in the dedication ceremony.

Issac Gaetz remained very active. He had founded the first Sunday School in 1888 and continued as the Sunday School Superintendent. In 1892, Caroline Gaetz helped to form the first Methodist Ladies Aid and was elected as the first president.

In October 1893, Issac Gaetz's wife Belle passed away from typhoid fever and exactly one month later, Issac died. Together with Jane McLelland, they became the first people to be buried in the new Methodist Cemetery on the brow of the East Hill on land donated to the church by John Jost Gaetz, a nephew. Another nephew, G. Wilbert Smith agreed to become the new Sunday School superintendent.

In 1895, with much improved health and a much-improved financial situation with the sales of land in the new townsite, Leonard Gaetz, Caroline and the younger children moved to Brandon Manitoba where Leonard had taken as new position as a minister. Caroline was also pleased with the move as it allowed daughters Glass and Marion the chance to further their education and train as schoolteachers.

Unfortunately, by the end of the decade, Caroline's health began to fail. She suffered a serious heart attack. She and Leonard moved back to Red Deer to a new cottage home on River (56th) Street where so many of their daughters had homes, that the street was often nicknamed Son-In-Law Avenue.

On December 24th, 1906, Caroline Gaetz became suddenly fatigued while cleaning up the dishes from breakfast. She sat in a chair to rest, but had a sudden heart attack and died. Similar to the circumstances with Belle and Issac, Leonard did not long survive her. Suffering from the debilitating effects of diabetes, he passed away in June 1907.

Plans were well under way to have a new church building constructed on Ross Street. Leonard Gaetz was chair of the building committee until ten days before his death. When the building was finally completed in 1910, it was named Leonard Gaetz Memorial Methodist Church in his honour. The family also purchased a beautiful pipe organ for \$2000 and dedicated to the memory of their mother.

Meanwhile a new person arrived in Red Deer from Nova Scotia in 1903, Annie Louise Siddall. She was to figure very prominently in the history of the Gaetz family, this church and our community. Born in 1881 in Oxford, Cumberland County Nova Scotia, she became a schoolteacher at the age of 19, but after three years, decided to try a new adventure as a teacher on the prairie frontier. She traveled west on a harvest train. Although she had a ticket to Moose Jaw, because of the hard conditions on that train, she got sick and disembarked at Wolseley,

Saskatchewan. A teacher's agency there found her a new job at Mound Lake, a brand new school district 36 miles east of Red Deer in the Delburne area.

She arrived in Red Deer on a cold, wet, fall day. When she got off the train the site was not appealing. There was a sea of mud, as there were no paved streets or sidewalks. She waded across the street to a wood frame hotel to get a room. When she went upstairs to her room she found that there were no locks on the door. The desk clerk told her not to worry since Red Deer was a very safe place. Nevertheless, she barricaded the door to her room that night.

Fortunately, one of the settlers from Mound Lake, the secretary of the school board, was in town- not a usual occurrence because with the bad roads and 36-mile distance, someone from Mound Lake might make it into Red Deer only once a month. He was in town to pick up the mail and was able to take the new teacher out to the new school the next day.

Her trip to Mound Lake was an awful one, which took over ten hours over the very muddy and bumpy trail. It rained and snowed the whole trip. She only saw one other traveler on the road. Ironically, the young man on horseback who passed them would later become her husband, Fred Gaetz.

When Annie arrived at the school, she found the conditions there were also very rough. The school had just been built – a crude, uninsulated frame shack on the prairie. The school was equipped with only a blackboard, a broom and a dustpan, chalk, brush and a few desks. There were no school textbooks and there weren't any for a few more weeks until another settler traveled into Red Deer and picked some up.

Another problem was that there was not school bell. As most settlers did not have a clock, children often were late. Consequently, Miss Siddall organized a box social and raised \$18 for a bell.

Teaching 31 pupils was a great challenge. Many had not gone to school for two years or more. For all her hard work, she was to be paid \$50, but as the settlers were cash poor, she did not receive her first month's salary until after Christmas.

Nevertheless, she kept going. By June, she had chalked up a pretty good school year. She had also struck up a strong romance with young Frederick Warren Gaetz, one of the younger sons of Leonard and Caroline Gaetz. They were married in September 1904 and moved to Red Deer as in those days, married women were usually prohibited from teaching school.

Fred Gaetz ran a livery barn business. Annie began a life of keeping the household and raising a family which ultimately consisted of three girls and a boy. Annie also became very active in a number of organizations connected with this church such as the Women's Association, the Women's Missionary Society, and the Sunday School. In addition, she worked with charitable groups such as the Red Cross and social welfare organizations such as the W.C.T.U. I have used this latter description quite carefully. Most people today think of the W.C.T.U. as simply a moral and religious group dedicated to the abolition of all use of alcohol. However, if the breadwinner of the family drank up the family income, destitution and poverty followed. All too often there was also violence and spousal abuse. The W.C.T.U. worked hard to eliminate these very serious problems and lobbied on

behalf of women and families for such things as widows' pensions, improved dower rights, support for neglected and orphaned children and the women's right to vote. In other words, Annie L. Gaetz through her activity with the W.C.T.U. and other groups, was very much a social activist and supporter of improved lives for women and families in Alberta.

Annie also loved to tell stories and to write. Times were very tough in the 1930's. To help supplement the family income, she began writing articles for the newsletter. In the 1940's, she published her first book, The Park Country. This was followed by two other books, Trails of Yesterday and Footprints of the Martin Gaetz Family, as well as numerous newspaper articles, essays and short stories. She did much to preserve and promote the history of this community and of this church.

In the 1950's, Annie did a number of radio broadcasts on Red Deer's early history. She had a wonderful rich voice with a unique blend of Nova Scotia and prairie accents, which made her a delight to hear. As she got older she devoted herself to the Pioneers and Old Timers Association and became the mother of the Old Timers Lodge across the street from her home. She also became a founding member of the Red Deer Archives.

She never flagged in her commitment to Gaetz Church. She continued teaching Sunday School, working with the W.A., W.M.S. and the U.C.W. She organized innumerable church and community suppers. She delighted in sitting in the back pews at Sunday service, cuddling up to her beloved Fred, who was as big a man and she was a tiny woman. It was a wonderful and touching sight to see.

Tragedy struck just before Christmas in 1963, when Fred passed away. Annie persevered and kept up all her volunteer work. In 1965, the Public School Board decided to honour her by naming a school Annie L. Gaetz Elementary.

Annie's health eventually began to fail. She went blind and deaf, but determinedly kept walking to church and her meetings for as long as she was able. It is certainly an indication that God does watch over us that Annie, who could no longer see if the lights were red or green, used to walk across the street without hesitation. Remarkably, she was never hit by a car.

After a series of strokes, Annie L. Gaetz passed away on September 17, 1972. She had been so sure that she would not long survive her husband Fred that she had put the digits 196- on the tombstone for the date of her passing. As she lived another two years into the next decade, a new tombstone had to be made for her.

Another remarkable woman who gave remarkable service to the United Church in a different way was Constance Ward. Born in Warwickshire England, she, her sister and parents had emigrated to the Red Deer area in 1890 after her father received a glowing portrayal of this district from Reverend Leonard Gaetz. They homesteaded in the Willowdale district. Immediately, the Wards became active members of the local Methodist Church in Springvale. Both Mr. and Mrs. Ward led the Sunday School, while Mrs. Ward also served as church organist. Constance became active in a number of Methodist youth organizations such as the Epworth League.

While on the homestead, Constance had a dramatic experience, which indicates both the trying conditions often faced by homesteaders but also the resilience, and resourcefulness with which they overcame those challenges. Charles

Ward was chinking up one of the log buildings on the farm, when he accidentally struck his leg with the axe, creating a very severe wound to his shin. He told Constance to run to the house to get a needle and thread, but not to tell her mother what had just happened. Upon returning, Constance helped her injured father sew up the gaping wound on the leg and then to bandage it. Her father then returned to his original work, albeit at a much slower and more gingerly pace.

In 1907, the Wards moved into Red Deer where Charles Ward had a significant business interest with the Red Deer Butter and Cheese Association along with his close friend Joseph Cole. Incidentally, the alter in front is dedicated to the memory of Joseph and Hannah Cole.

Constance took teacher's training and taught at Edwell, Balmoral, Waskasoo and Innisfail. In 1910, she went to Toronto where she spent a year at the Methodist Training School. She became a deaconess and missionary. In 1918, she went to China where she was to work for the next 35 years. She served as a teacher and then headmistress at a number of mission schools. Later she became active in evangelistic work and served at the United Church Mission Hospital in Chungking with the famous Dr. Stewart Allen.

Throughout these many years of missionary work, she kept up her contacts with Gaetz Church, often through her close friend and confidant, Mina Cole. The Gaetz W.M.S. in turn sent a great deal of money and support to the China Missions with which Constance was associated.

With the change of regime to the Communists in the early 1950's, life became very difficult and dangerous for Constance and the other China missionaries. When the Chungking Hospital was captured by Communist forces, Constance and Dr. Allen were forced to kneel for several hours in an accusation meeting. Constance was eventually released and returned to Canada. She paid a visit home to Red Deer in June 1952 and took great delight in going out with Mina Cole and collecting more than forty varieties of wildflowers, most of which she had not seen since she had left the farm.

After taking an official retirement at a national United Church conference in Toronto in 1952, Constance moved out to Vancouver where she then launched into a new career of social work and church service.

One final outstanding person from this church and congregation who I would like to mention is Nita Thorne. Born in Andrews Indiana on the banks of the Wabash River, she moved at age eleven to Roanoke to live with an aunt and uncle after her mother died. Being very talented musically, she played the organ at the local church. Nita decided to become a schoolteacher. At age 17, she found herself teaching a class of predominately boys, many of whom were only slightly younger than she was. Nevertheless, two words one could always use to describe Niota Thorne were fearless and formidable.

In 1904, she married Ora Thorne. The following year, they moved up to a homestead 18 miles west of Ponoka. They tried to build their first home in the very brutal winter of 1906-07. Nita went into to Ponoka and got a job working in a confectionary to try and earn some cash income. She also played the organ in the Presbyterian Church in the morning, the Anglican Church in the afternoon and the

Methodist Church in the afternoon. Ponoka has always been a centre for ecumenicalism and in 1916, it had one of the first mergers into a United Church.

Nita and Ora moved to Camrose where he had a job running a grain elevator and where Nita learned to grade grain. In 1911, they moved to Lacombe to run a lumber yard. In 1918, they came to Red Deer to run a lumber yard here. Nita played the organ at the Presbyterian Church and was the assistant organist at Gaetz with Alice Youmans Hamilton and then Helen Moore Dawe until 1925, when Mrs. Dawe went to the Presbyterian Church. Nita organized a Sunday School Orchestra at Gaetz with her playing the piano and Ora playing the trombone. In 1919, she started the first C.G.I.T. group at Gaetz.

In 1923, she and Ora moved to Bowden. Nita became active with the W.A. and was pleased that it became the first branch to affiliate with the W.M.S. she served as a delegate to the Presbytery and Conference and in 1933, became the president of the Lay Association.

In 1936, the Thorne's moved back to Red Deer where Mr. Thorne managed another lumber yard and Mrs. Thorne worked as well. She was an excellent businessperson and excelled at estimating. It is often said that she could tell almost to the final number the amount of lumber and other supplies that a contractor would need for a project. Some would think that they knew better than the woman on the other side of the counter, but often would be back to get the additional quantity that Mrs. Thorne had told them they would need.

Mrs. Thorne became president of the both the W.A. and W.M.S and the secretary of the Board of Stewards. When the Red Deer and Lacombe Presbyteries united, Nita Thorne became the first president of the new organization. She and Ora also organized another Sunday School orchestra for Gaetz.

In 1943, Mrs. Thorne made history by being elected as the first woman president of the Alberta Lay Association of the United Church and in 1944, she was elected the first woman president of the National Lay Advisory Council. As president, she became the first woman member of the National Council of the United Church.

During her term, Mrs. Thorne actively pushed for a more active role for laity in the management and work of the Church. She helped set policies for lay visitation in addition to pastoral visits by the clergy as well as for the interpretation of social issues to the laity and their relation to local problems. She also helped draft the constitution for the new Canadian Council of Churches.

Nita and Ora Thorne never had any family. Nita's only blood relative was a cousin back in Indiana. Thus the Church became her family, in a very real as well as spiritual sense. She had the same intense devotion to Gaetz Church as a mother has to her child. Her commitment to her co-parishioners was practically unrivaled.

Ora Thorne passed away in 1954, but Nita continued on with her tireless work for the church until her passing in 1967.

What then can I say to conclude and summarize this string of biographical vignettes of some of the members of Gaetz Church. Certainly, all were remarkable, accomplished people who lived rich and varied lives. While each of those lives was unique, there are some similarities. First and foremost, there was a steadfast dedication to God and a commitment to carrying out his work through service to

others. There is also a lifelong commitment to nurturing new growth, literally and figuratively, physically and spiritually. There is a belief in the value of education. There is an element of the social gospel that one can advance the work of Christ and the Church by striving to improve the well-being of those around you and those living elsewhere. Moreover, each of those I have talked about had a talent for and appreciation for music as one of the finer aspects of life and as a worthy expression of praise for God and all his wondrous gifts.

Today is yet another day of Spring, that glorious time of growth and renewal. Let us reflect and give thanks to all of those who have set the roots of this Church and this congregation and who have made possible the wonderful and beautiful growth and potential which lies ahead of us all.

**Michael Dawe
June 1, 2003**