

# AIRING DIRTY LAUNDRY: THE PUBLIC CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING CHURCH UNION IN KNOX'S (GALT) PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## **Abstract**

On June 10, 1925 there occurred a massive split within the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). On that date, the government of Canada legislated into existence The United Church of Canada (UCC), a new denomination created from the merger of three others: the Congregational Union of Canada, the Methodist Church and the PCC. Yet, while the country's Congregationalists and Methodists were virtually unanimous in their support for this new venture, its Presbyterians endured over twenty years of dispute, the final result of which was the decision of a large minority not to join the new church but rather to continue their separate existence as the PCC. While this history has been well documented at the national level, my paper provides a unique insight into the experiences of one congregation, that of Knox's (Galt) Presbyterian Church.

## **Introduction**

Up to the time of church union, Knox's (Galt) was the city's largest and most prominent Presbyterian congregation<sup>1</sup> and, interestingly, it was also the one in which the question of union became most controversial and most public. In January 1925, its members voted to stay out of the UCC, although a large minority left to join the new denomination. It is my contention that personality, especially that of pastor J.K. Fraser,

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<sup>1</sup>By 1859, it was the second largest congregation of the Free Church synod in Canada, behind only Knox, Toronto and in 1869, erected its present building with a capacity of 2,000. Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) Archives, Knox's Galt Presbyterian Church (Cambridge, Ont.) fonds, 1977-4002-1-7, "Treading New Paths," by Jennie Cowan.

rather than denominational concerns, had the biggest influence on the congregation as it wrestled with the issue of church union.

### **Historical Background**

In 1831, pastor William Stewart of the Glasgow Colonial Society established St. Andrew's Church among village residents who belonged to the Church of Scotland. In 1835, John Bayne (1806-1859) replaced Stewart, serving the congregation until his death in 1859. In July 1844, Bayne and approximately three-quarters of the membership withdrew from St. Andrew's and formed Knox's, a congregation of the newly formed Upper Canadian Free Church Synod.<sup>2</sup>

### **Church Union Period**

In 1898, Knox's called its first Canadian born and educated minister, the renowned preacher and novelist R.E. Knowles (1868-1946).<sup>3</sup> It was during his tenure (1904) that the idea of church union was first acted upon by the Presbyterian General Assembly. Even at an early stage, many in Knox's were keenly aware of Canada's rapid evolution and were in favor of church union as a way to meet the country's changing needs. After a first look at the proposed Basis of Union in 1908, the Session declared,

It is gratifying to observe the progress already 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.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Constance Sanders, ed., *Knox's: 1869-1969* (Privately Published, 1969), 4-6. Bayne was also instrumental in the founding of this provincial synod.

<sup>3</sup>Jean O'Grady, *Famous People Who Have Met Me: The Life and Interviews of R.E. Knowles* (Toronto: Colombo and Company, 1999), 1-11.

<sup>4</sup>Knox's (Galt) Presbyterian Church Archives, Annual Report, 1909.

Then, in March 1912, Presbyterians across Canada were asked to vote on two questions concerning the possibility of church union. The first asked for acceptance or rejection of union in principle and the second for approval or disapproval of the Basis of Union in particular.<sup>5</sup> When the ballots from Knox's were counted, there was found a clear majority in favor of union.<sup>6</sup>

Table 1. 1912 Vote in Knox's

	Question #1		Question #2	
	For	Against	For	Against
Elders	21	4	17	3
Members	291	61	231	55
Adherents	21	3	16	3
Totals	333	68	264	61

Following this endorsement of union, however, significant changes in the pastoral situation at Knox's led to a shift in the attitude among the members. In 1907, R.E. Knowles had been involved in a horrific train derailment near Guelph in which several people were killed. While he escaped with only a crushed shoulder and a few other injuries, the experience led him to have a nervous breakdown. He was away from work for months following the accident as well as for long stretches between 1911 and 1915. In 1912, the congregation was forced to hire an assistant pastor, J.E. Mothersill. Then, in May 1914, Knowles was granted a six-month leave of absence by the congregation and a further six-month extension to this leave in September. In January 1915, he tendered his

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<sup>5</sup>C.E. Silcox, *Church Union in Canada: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Institute for Social and Religious Research, 1933), 169.

<sup>6</sup>"Vote of Knox on Church Union," *Galt Daily Reporter*, 27 March 1912, 1.

resignation and spent most of the next five years in psychiatric hospitals in Toronto, although the exact nature of his illness is unknown.<sup>7</sup>

When R.E. Knowles resigned from Knox's, the congregation found itself in a difficult position. J.E. Mothersill had proven an effective leader during his mentor's absences and was well liked, but he accepted a call to Montreal almost immediately so as not to cause a controversy over the question of his own promotion.<sup>8</sup> Yet, his resignation did not prevent unrest. In February 1915, the congregation had a dispute over whether to call a minister immediately, which ultimately it was not able to do.<sup>9</sup> In March, their renowned organist resigned to accept "a better position".<sup>10</sup> By June, after several eager applicants had filled the pulpit, the congregation was in disarray and "not near enough unanimous to proceed with a call to a minister."<sup>11</sup>

In September 1915, however, Knox's was prepared to call J.K. Fraser as pastor. Having studied at Dalhousie University, the Presbyterian College, Montreal, and several German universities, he had returned to Canada just that summer after thirteen years at the Second Presbyterian Church, Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>12</sup> The evidence shows that Fraser returned from sunny Charleston largely to take part in the growing movement to oppose church union. His brother Daniel, for instance, had already been vocal in

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<sup>7</sup>O'Grady, 17-21.

<sup>8</sup>PCC Archives, 1977-4002-1-7, "Treading New Paths."

<sup>9</sup>Knox's Galt Presbyterian Church Archives, Session Minutes, 1915 February 3.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 1915 March 25.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 1915 June 16.

<sup>12</sup>"Unanimous Call from Knox Church," *Galt Daily Reporter*, 9 September 1915, 1.

opposition to union and the two were close.<sup>13</sup> Also, Fraser had returned to Canada to seek the recognition of his ordination by the 1915 General Assembly without actually having a position and was fortunate to find the vacancy at Knox's.

Most tellingly, Fraser began his campaign against church union almost immediately after he arrived in Galt. In August 1916, Paris industrialist John Penman, who was literally bankrolling organized opposition to union, noticed an anti-union article Fraser had written in *The Outlook* and wrote to thank him. Showing himself to be remarkably well acquainted with the Canadian situation, he 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."<sup>14</sup> He also began an extensive correspondence with J.W. MacNamara, secretary of the newly formed Presbyterian Church Association (to oppose union), who was stationed in Toronto. He wrote to MacNamara, also in August 1916, "I came to Galt only last November and do not have our men yet".<sup>15</sup>

About a month after J.K. Fraser was inducted at Knox's, the question of church union was formally put to Presbyterians across Canada for a second time. While the Congregationalists and Methodists had already declared themselves ready to consummate union, the General Assembly decided that another referendum was needed in light of the surprising level of opposition revealed by the first national vote. Across the PCC, the second plebiscite showed an increase in sentiment against church union, likely for fear of

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<sup>13</sup>Daniel J. Fraser, "Recent Church Union Movements in Canada," *Harvard Theological Review* 8 (1915): 363-378.

<sup>14</sup>PCC Archives, Presbyterian Church Association (PCA) Papers, 1973-1003-2-11, J.K. Fraser to John Penman, 1916 August 14. Robert Campbell and Ephraim Scott were prominent and staunch opponents of union, but their age and conservatism were thought to be unattractive.

<sup>15</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-2-11, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1916 August 17.

a denominational split, while the strength of support remained relatively stagnant.<sup>16</sup> In Knox's, the people returned another pro-union vote, but this time by a narrow margin.<sup>17</sup>

Table 2. 1915 Vote in Knox's

	Question #1	
	For	Against
Elders	18	4
Members	146	147
Adherents	6	9
Totals	170	160

The nation-wide results of the second vote put the General Assembly in a difficult position. While there had been an increasing tide of opposition to union, there remained a majority who favored it. In 1917, dispute had grown so fierce that the Assembly decided to table the matter until after the conclusion of war in Europe.<sup>18</sup>

In 1921, when the General Assembly finally reopened the issue of church union it declared the desire to consummate union, "as expeditiously as possible."<sup>19</sup> As soon as it did this, the Presbyterian Church Association (PCA) revived its activity and J.K. Fraser joined its national executive. And, when the PCA looked to organize a branch in Galt, he was its key leader in the city. Fraser also wrote extensively on the subject, including, for instance, an article that refuted the copious contributions of prominent unionist, George

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<sup>16</sup>N. Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada: 1904-1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1985), 72.

<sup>17</sup>"Two Churches for Union, One Against," *Galt Daily Reporter*, 29 November 1915, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Clifford, 80.

<sup>19</sup>Silcox, 180.

Pidgeon, to the *Presbyterian Witness*<sup>20</sup> as well as several anti-union letters to the editor of Toronto's *Globe* newspaper under a pseudonym, A. de Plunge.<sup>21</sup>

J.K. Fraser's opposition to organic union was intellectually grounded and highly intense. Like his well-known brother, Daniel, he was a theological liberal who believed that traditional theology was "practically a foreign language" and would not consent, tacitly or otherwise, to the traditional doctrine of the Basis of Union.<sup>22</sup> Although Fraser was always opposed to church union, theologically and practically, he became especially enraged by the prospect of creating a united church through legislation, as was done, arguing that such coercion was an unacceptable infringement on the right of religious liberty.<sup>23</sup>

Having failed to recruit pastor M.B. Davidson of Central Church as another leader of the PCA in Galt, J.W. MacNamara relied almost exclusively on J.K. Fraser as his eyes, ears and voice in the city. In early 1923, he appealed to Fraser about the possibility of the PCA's holding an organizational rally at Knox's. While Fraser was keen on the idea, most of the elders there were unionists. In order to achieve consent to the PCA's request, Fraser was forced by the Session to ask for a reference letter from MacNamara, assuring the Session that the meeting would not be controversial.<sup>24</sup> But, even after the receipt of

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<sup>20</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-3, "Spiritual Unity and Federal Union," by J.K. Fraser. Failing its publication there, he tried vigorously to have it printed in pamphlet form, as he considered it superior to what other anti-unionists were producing. See PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-3, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 February 7.

<sup>21</sup> PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-3, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 January 30.

<sup>22</sup>"Christian Church Must Keep Alive Soul of Nation," *Galt Daily Reporter*, 2 May 1921, 1.

<sup>23</sup>"Rev. Dr. Fraser Preached on What Will Happen if Union of Churches Should Be Law," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 20 November 1923, 1.

<sup>24</sup> PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-3, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 February 13.

such a letter, the elders decided not to grant the building to the PCA unless a similar meeting was offered to the unionist side.<sup>25</sup> The question being tabled at Fraser's request, he wrote MacNamara to suggest that rather than concede a meeting to the unionists, the secretary might withdraw the request and try again for Central.<sup>26</sup> Yet, when Davidson and its Session would not budge from their position, it was decided to secure Knox's for a meeting on March 28, as they considered Galt too important to ignore.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly upset with the Session's insistence that a pro-union meeting be held in Knox's, Fraser began preaching regularly on the church union issue. One week prior to the anti-union rally, he spoke on the topic in his sermon saying,

Personally, I doubt if organic union is possible, and what is more, I doubt if it is desirable...Organic union would necessitate agreement on many things where agreement is impossible and unnecessary. Individuality means diversity and diversity means power.<sup>28</sup>

Although his Session opposed him on the matter of church union, Fraser was still able to find strong support for the PCA in Galt, particularly among prominent businessmen in Knox's. By far the most important of these was wealthy industrialist R.O. McCulloch (1864-1943), who sat on the Financial Committee of the PCA.<sup>29</sup> Other key figures in the PCA from Knox's were R.M. Hamilton, A.D. Porter and W.W. Wilkinson.

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<sup>25</sup>Session Minutes, 1923 March 7.

<sup>26</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-3, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 March 7.

<sup>27</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-3, J.W. MacNamara to J.K. Fraser, 1923 March 9.

<sup>28</sup>“Attraction of Mountebank No Test of Church Efficiency,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 20 March 1923, 1.

<sup>29</sup>Jim Quantrell, *Cambridge Mosaic: An Inquiry into Who's Who in the History of Cambridge* (Cambridge, ON: City of Cambridge, 1998), 134-135.

On March 28, 1923, the PCA had its first rally in Knox's and J.K. Fraser promised that it would be "the most important church meeting ever held in Galt."<sup>30</sup> However, because atrocious weather had limited the attendance and because the speakers ran long, there was no time that evening to organize a local executive.<sup>31</sup> The following day, local unionists responded publicly by putting a paid advertisement in the local paper, which argued that the majority of Presbyterians had already voted for union.<sup>32</sup>

Because the PCA had not been able to organize a local executive, there was a clear need to arrange another meeting for that express purpose. But, because of the Session's attitude, it could hardly return soon to Knox's. However, there were few other options available to it. The PCA continued to be snubbed by Central and was rather uninterested in First, as it was not considered influential. As a result, J.W. MacNamara was forced to suggest the use of a public place in Galt, such as the library or YMCA.<sup>33</sup> An even bigger problem was J.K. Fraser's health. He wrote to MacNamara in early April, "I am sorry, I am going to be away just now, but I must do so in order to avoid a breakdown."<sup>34</sup> Finally, in late May, Galt's anti-unionists were able to organize a local executive.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>"Meeting Here Wednesday on Church Union Promises to Be Important Occasion," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 26 March 1923, 1.

<sup>31</sup>"Unity Is Born, Not Made, Says Speaker at Knox," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 29 March 1923, 1. The speakers that evening were A.J. MacGillivray of Guelph and Thomas McMillan of Toronto, two prominent figures in the PCA.

<sup>32</sup>"News and Notes of Galt Churches," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 29 March 1923, 3.

<sup>33</sup> PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.W. MacNamara to J.K. Fraser, 1923 April 5.

<sup>34</sup> PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 April 6.

<sup>35</sup> PCA Papers, 1973-1003-16-7, A.D. Porter to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 May 25.

Following approval of the draft union legislation by the 1923 General Assembly, the next several months saw the church union debate carried out in the political arena. Unionists in Galt were content to let the denominational leaders fight for continued progress, while the city's anti-unionists also abstained from this period of the struggle. Because the riding of South Waterloo was not represented in the provincial Legislative Assembly at the time, and since its MP, William Elliott, was an openly anti-unionist member of Knox's, the local PCA thought there was really nothing to be done.<sup>36</sup>

J.K. Fraser, conversely, deepened his personal investment in the opposition cause. In July 1923, for instance, he immediately began cutting out pro-union clippings from the *Globe* and sending them to J.W. MacNamara, asking for responses from the PCA.<sup>37</sup> He also started traveling extensively to speak in places like Sarnia, Walkerton, Barrie, Ottawa and even Prince Edward Island to help preserve a strong remnant of the PCC in the event of church union.

In the autumn of 1923, after it had become clear that there would be a split in Canadian Presbyterianism, the campaign began in earnest to win individual congregations for the continuing PCC. Since May, the local branch of the PCA had been meeting regularly. However, it was the organization of a Women's League, at Knox's, on October 30, that proved a turning point.<sup>38</sup> Kept from the decision making of the PCA, the women who joined together to oppose church union were less cautious and in many

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<sup>36</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-16-8, A.D. Porter and R.M. Hamilton to W.F. Nickel, 1924 April 8.

<sup>37</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 July 19.

<sup>38</sup>“Local Presbyterian Church Ladies Will be Canvassed to Find Out Views on Union,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 31 October 1923, 1.

ways, more effective than their male counterparts.<sup>39</sup> A Mrs. Daniel of Toronto, who came to help the local women organize themselves, suggested the best strategy in Galt would be to conduct a door-to-door canvass of all the city's Presbyterians. Mrs. William Elliott and Mrs. R.O. McCulloch of Knox's were the two primary leaders of the Women's League in Galt.<sup>40</sup>

In October, J.K. Fraser and his sympathizers in Knox's decided to press the congregation to declare itself against union at the earliest possible date.<sup>41</sup> In November, the Women's League conducted a canvass of Knox's Church and found an overwhelming majority, 719-196, opposed to organic union on the basis of the proposed legislation.<sup>42</sup> Also in November, the PCA held another rally in Knox's, at which J.W. MacNamara was the guest speaker. Following his address, a resolution against the proposed legislation was passed and forwarded to federal and provincial politicians.<sup>43</sup>

These two events, the Women's League canvass, and the PCA resolution, triggered a fierce conflict in the congregation as well as a response from the city's unionists. Unionist pastor K.J. MacDonald of First Church, who had become J.K. Fraser's nemesis, wrote to R.J. Wilson of the Joint Union Committee,

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<sup>39</sup>Roberta Clare, "The Role of Women in the Preservation of the Presbyterian Church in Canada: 1921-1928," in *The Burning Bush and a Few Acres of Snow*, ed. W. Klempa (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1994), 267-268.

<sup>40</sup>Other Knox's members chosen as Women's League officers were Mrs. Cavers and Mrs. Blake.

<sup>41</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 October 15.

<sup>42</sup>"Congregation of Knox Church is Opposed to Union," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 14 December 1923, 1.

<sup>43</sup>"Strong Resolution Against Union Bill Until Presented to Church Members for Vote Passed Here," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 10 November 1923, 1.

The Presbyterian Association is besieging our city—its forces mainly centred around Knox Church...As for us, we have done nothing and perhaps that was a wise policy. However, the time for action has arrived.<sup>44</sup>

Wilson responded by organizing a successful pro-union rally at Knox's, to which he sent two speakers, George Pidgeon and J.W. Graham, the latter being Superintendent of Methodist Colleges.<sup>45</sup> A member of Knox's, who happened to be a close personal friend of prominent Methodist T. Albert Moore's, even forwarded a copy of MacNamara's address to the Joint Union Committee so that Pidgeon could refute it, point-by-point, on his visit.<sup>46</sup>

J.K. Fraser was not at all amused by the decision of the Joint Union Committee to organize a rally on his turf. He even told the chairman that the request was "an insult to me and the church." Suspecting K.J. MacDonald of being behind R.J. Wilson's initiative, Fraser bragged to J.W. MacNamara that Knox's and First were both staying out of union. If MacDonald thought otherwise, he was "going to get a jolt."<sup>47</sup>

On December 2, R.O. McCulloch brought a request before the Session, on behalf of several others in the church, that a congregational meeting be held after worship on the sixteenth of the month to discuss the proposed bill of union. Although most of the elders did not want such a meeting, they saw no choice but to consent to the request.<sup>48</sup> Just over a week later, however, the Session realized that the meeting was not going to be used for

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<sup>44</sup>United Church of Canada (UCC) Archives, Church Union Collection, 83.063C, Box 26, File 586, Bureau of Literature and Information: Correspondence, Galt, Ontario. K.J. MacDonald to R.J. Wilson, 1923 November 7.

<sup>45</sup>"Church Union Advocates Present Case at Meeting in Knox Church—Two Denominations Represented," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 28 November 1923, 1.

<sup>46</sup>Church Union Collection, 83.063C, Box 26, File 586, J.W. Taylor to T. Albert Moore, n.d.

<sup>47</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 November 19.

<sup>48</sup>Session Minutes, 1923 December 2.

mere discussion but to take a vote on the question of church union and pass a resolution against it. By this point, K.J. MacDonald was advising the unionist elders at Knox's, who were severely at odds with their own moderator. R.J. Wilson, through MacDonald, advised the Session to try to defeat any resolution, or failing that, to protest the unconstitutional nature of the meeting.<sup>49</sup> As such, they reconvened on Wednesday December 12 to declare, by a margin of 17-5, that no vote would be taken at the upcoming meeting and even resolved that the Session was "in favor of church union as embodied in the bill as drafted by the Assembly's committee."<sup>50</sup>

This special meeting of the Session precipitated an unsightly public controversy. The next day, Knox's unionist clerk, William Burnett, stated in the local paper that the Session had decided against allowing a vote at the congregational meeting and that it had even passed a resolution in favour of church union.<sup>51</sup> That same day, R.O. McCulloch had published a letter to the editor of the *Galt Evening Reporter (GER)*, demanding to know why unionists within the PCC, including those in Knox's, refused to hear the voices of the people.<sup>52</sup> The next day, another anti-unionist in Knox's responded to Burnett by sending in the results of the Women's League canvass and arguing that "it was strongly inconsistent for the majority members of Session to place their views on record at the same time they seek to deny the same privilege to the congregation."<sup>53</sup> On

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<sup>49</sup>Church Union Collection, 83.063C, Box 26, File 586, R.J. Wilson to K.J. MacDonald, 1923 December 10.

<sup>50</sup>Session Minutes, 1923 December 12.

<sup>51</sup>"Session of Knox Church in Favour of Church Union," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 13 December 1923, 1.

<sup>52</sup>R.O. McCulloch to Editor, *Galt Evening Reporter*, 13 December 1923, 22.

the third day, Saturday December 15, William Burnett issued another statement, defending his right to report the events of a Session meeting and slamming the unconstitutional and unwelcome canvass of the Women's League.<sup>54</sup> That same day, another member wrote to the editor, accusing anti-unionists of misconstruing the results of the canvass, which asked members only if they would like the legislation amended to provide for the continuing existence of the PCC.<sup>55</sup> For his part, J.K. Fraser wrote in a feature article that the fifteen elders had indeed voted "to obliterate" the PCC, but that just as John Bayne had in the 1840s, the members of Knox's would continue to fight for religious liberty.<sup>56</sup>

Besides the war carried on in the Galt newspaper, the unionists on Session also advertised their pro-union resolution in Toronto's *Star Weekly* on the eve of the congregational meeting. J.K. Fraser was incensed, writing to J.W. MacNamara,

You doubtless saw the utterly false notice of the attitude of my church on the 'union' question that appeared in the *Star* Saturday night. It was simply the expression of 15 dough-headed elders who are biased and do not know the issue, have not brains enough to see it. They are discredited with the congregation, who are up in arms against them.<sup>57</sup>

Not surprisingly, the congregational meeting of Sunday December 16 did nothing to calm this contentious situation. W.W. Wilkinson introduced a resolution that called the

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<sup>53</sup>"Congregation of Knox Church Is Opposed to Union," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 14 December 1923, 1.

<sup>54</sup>"Clerk of Session of Knox Church Makes Statement," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 15 December 1923, 1.

<sup>55</sup>E.A. Hughes to Editor, *Galt Evening Reporter*, 15 December 1923, 3.

<sup>56</sup>"Dr. Fraser Speaks of the Situation in Knox Church in Church Union Matter," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 15 December 1923, 1.

<sup>57</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 December 17.

proposed bill “coercive and destructive of the rights of religious liberty.”<sup>58</sup> The anti-unionist majority present also called for a final vote on the congregation’s decision within a few weeks. When the anti-unionists decided to pass the resolution without allowing any discussion, and even started handing out ballots for a final vote, most of the unionists walked out of the meeting. K.J. MacDonald, given a copy of the minutes, forwarded them to R.J. Wilson, saying, “There is a meeting of Session tomorrow night and I have advised them to refuse to pay any attention to the decision of the meeting.”<sup>59</sup>

One consequence of this congregational meeting was an even more hostile environment in Knox’s. Fraser had demanded that the Session offer a retraction of their report to the *Star* and gloated, “The unionists were beaten to a frazzle.”<sup>60</sup> When the Session met again on December 18, they did their best to undo the decisions that had been taken at the congregational meeting two days earlier. While they stated a willingness to hold a constitutional vote at an appropriate point in the future, the elders declared that the timing of such a vote would not be as demanded at the meeting. Moreover, the meeting had met with their “unqualified disapproval” and they argued that the resolution taken was “of no validity whatever.”<sup>61</sup> William Burnett again decided to advertise the results of the Session meeting in the local paper, recording its displeasure

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<sup>58</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 December 17.

<sup>59</sup>Church Union Collection, 83.063C, Box 26, File 586, K.J. MacDonald to R.J. Wilson, 1923 December 23.

<sup>60</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 December 17.

<sup>61</sup>Session Minutes, 1923 December 18.

with the tactics employed by the anti-unionists. Furious at the Session's stubborn unionism and use of the media, J.K. Fraser called them "an ignorant lot."<sup>62</sup>

The conflict in Knox's continued in January, and indeed throughout the rest of 1924, although in a much more reserved way. When all of the ballots, which were handed out at December's congregational meeting, were returned, there was a strong majority of 604-36 against union. However, the clerk of Session had written to every family in the congregation, asking them not to vote. The 36 who voted for union then, were clearly the unionists who did not get that letter in time.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, the anti-unionists saw the result as a clear justification of their aggressive approach to the matter.<sup>64</sup> Although the Session complained to the Presbytery of Guelph about the situation, the latter ruled that nothing could prevent a congregational meeting being called and a vote taken.<sup>65</sup> In response to the ruling of Presbytery, the Session passed, by a margin of 9-6, a strongly worded resolution of support for the union legislation and forwarded it to MPs in Ottawa.<sup>66</sup>

Despite J.K. Fraser's commitment to opposition, the situation in Knox's was so polemical that he needed to ease off in order to ensure that there would actually be a congregation left for the continuing PCC. Ever since the controversial events of December 1923, the congregation had remained bitterly divided and, in the words of one,

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<sup>62</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1923 December 25.

<sup>63</sup>"In Special Articles, Both Sides of Church Union in Galt Discussed," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 17 November 1924, 1, 4.

<sup>64</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1924 January 31.

<sup>65</sup>"Presbytery Rules Discussion of Matter for which Meeting Called Cannot be Forbidden," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 12 March 1923, 1.

<sup>66</sup>Session Minutes, 1924 April 29.

“had known no peace.” Although a majority was indeed against union, Fraser’s ideological approach had grown too zealous for most.<sup>67</sup> In October, he and other leaders decided to have yet another public meeting in Knox’s, but it was later canceled, as it was not thought “the psychological moment” for a meeting.<sup>68</sup> When J.W. MacNamara then appealed to R.M. Hamilton for a change of heart, he got a similar response.<sup>69</sup>

While the anti-unionist leaders in Knox’s sought to consolidate their gains among the congregation, confident that their sympathizers were in the majority, the unionists began to increase their efforts. R.E. Knowles, in particular, took up the unionist cause in the church. In 1921, Knowles had returned to health and taken up work as a freelance writer for the *Toronto Star*. In 1922, he moved back to Galt, where he began attending Knox’s and eventually became an active member in the congregation. While he had always been a moderate unionist, he was devastated by the controversy he observed while covering the 1923 General Assembly as a journalist.<sup>70</sup> Because of Knowles’ activity in Knox’s, he and J.K. Fraser became fierce enemies. In addition to being a highly popular, meddling former minister, Knowles had a huge audience for his implicitly unionist columns in the *Star*. Knowles even got under J.K. Fraser’s skin by sitting in the front pew and taking “copious notes” of his sermons.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>“In Special Articles, Both Sides of Church Union in Galt Discussed,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 17 November 1924, 1, 4.

<sup>68</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1924 November 3.

<sup>69</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-10-4, R.M. Hamilton to J.W. MacNamara, 1924 November 4.

<sup>70</sup>“Deadlock All but Hopeless, Seems to be No Middle Course,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 8 June 1923, 11.

<sup>71</sup>O’Grady, 23-29.

On December 10, 1924, the Session of Knox's met to make arrangements for a congregational meeting, which would be called to organize a vote on the question of entering the UCC. Although the unionist elders intended to hold the meeting off until January, so that their side might have more time to lobby the membership, they bowed to pressure and consented to a meeting on December 22. However, the Session did send a strongly worded letter endorsing church union to everyone in the congregation. They also granted the use of the building to the unionists, for three upcoming rallies.<sup>72</sup> J.K. Fraser's estimate of the situation was, "The unionists here are putting forth desperate efforts. But I think we are safe. They are descending to the lowest, dirtiest tactics—unworthy even of party politicians."<sup>73</sup>

At the first of the three unionist rallies, on December 14, the speaker was C.W. Gordon, a Presbyterian minister from Winnipeg and a close friend of R.E. Knowles, otherwise known by his famous penname, Ralph Connor.<sup>74</sup> The next day, the anti-unionist MP, Andrew Elliott, who was a member of Knox's, wrote a letter to the editor of the *GER* that was highly critical of Gordon's arguments.<sup>75</sup> Not wanting a repeat of the previous year's propaganda war, however, the *GER* refused to print any more correspondence about the church union situation in Galt.<sup>76</sup> However, this was only a temporary solution, as the two sides simply began putting paid advertisements in the

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<sup>72</sup>Session Minutes, 1924 December 10.

<sup>73</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1924 December 16.

<sup>74</sup>"Ralph Connor Gives Reasons for Supporting Union Movement," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 15 December 1924, 1.

<sup>75</sup>Andrew Elliott to the Editor, *Galt Evening Reporter*, 15 December 1924, 4.

<sup>76</sup>Editorial, *Galt Evening Reporter*, 19 December 1924, 3.

paper. On December 29, the unionists hosted another rally, at which J.R.P. Sclater was the featured speaker.<sup>77</sup> Then on January 6, they held a final meeting, at which Donald MacGregor of London was the guest speaker. Following his address, R.E. Knowles presented a point-by-point refutation of J.K. Fraser's "Address to the Presbyterian Church, Alberton, PEI," which had been given the previous summer and then been widely distributed in pamphlet form. In anticipation of this, Fraser declined to attend the meeting and R.M. Hamilton even put a notice in the *GER* of his boycott.<sup>78</sup>

Unfortunately, records of the congregational meeting called to arrange the vote on church union do not survive. However, we know that the period of voting was set to run from January 8 to January 24 and that William Burnett and J.K. Fraser had a major disagreement about the composition of the eligible voters list.<sup>79</sup> When the ballots were counted in the last week of January, it was found that Knox's had decided, by a count of 540-363, to stay out of the UCC.<sup>80</sup>

The result of the vote led rapidly to a split in Knox's. On January 29, the unionists of Knox's met with their counterparts from Central at the Wesley Methodist Church and again at the First Presbyterian Church, on February 1. At the second meeting, they resolved to withdraw from their present fellowship and join one of the city's UCC congregations.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, most of the unionist minority withdrew following the annual

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<sup>77</sup>"Speakers Favouring Union Are Heard," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 30 December 1924, 1.

<sup>78</sup>*Galt Evening Reporter*, 6 January 1925, 3.

<sup>79</sup>Session Minutes, 1925 January 4.

<sup>80</sup>Session Minutes, 1925 February 8.

<sup>81</sup>"Unionists of Non-Concurring Churches to Attend Some Other Church in Sympathy with Union," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 2 February 1925, 1.

congregational meeting on February 10<sup>82</sup> and began worshipping at First immediately.<sup>83</sup> When Knox's refused to issue them membership certificates *en masse* (meaning without each member having to meet with the minister individually, as was the custom), William Burnett simply filled out some certificates on his own and personally handed them over to the clerk of Session at First, A.B. Scott.<sup>84</sup>

In all, approximately 300 people withdrew from Knox's and 260 of them went to First Church. Some had positive reasons for moving to the UCC. John Thompson Taylor, for instance, a missionary to India from Knox's, believed so strongly in church union that he led his large extended family to First while he was on the other side of the world.<sup>85</sup> Most, however, left because they had been pushed by J.K. Fraser. In a patronizing letter to the congregation in anticipation of its final vote, he wrote:

If the church votes to remain Presbyterian, no one will be required to change his denomination. He will simply be where he has always been and where his fathers were before him. If, on the other hand, it votes to enter union, hundreds of its members will have taken from them 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?<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>“Annual Meeting of Knox Congregation was Held Last Night,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 11 February 1925, 1.

<sup>83</sup>Church Union Collection, 83.063C, Box 26, File 586, K.J. MacDonald to R.J. Wilson, 1925 April 9.

<sup>84</sup>Church Union Collection, 83.063C, Box 26, File 586, R.J. Wilson to K.J. MacDonald, 1925 May 25.

<sup>85</sup>Personal Conversation with Alex Taylor, 7 May 2006. For more on John Thompson Taylor's influence see, John Thompson Taylor to Editor, *Galt Evening Reporter*, 5 January 1925, 3 and UCC Archives, Taylor Family fonds, 87.307C, Box 1, File 1, Mother (Mrs. Taylor) to Bairnies, 1925 July 16.

<sup>86</sup>Church Union Collection, 83.063C, Box 19, File 441, “Pastoral Letter to the Members of Knox Church, Galt,” 1924.

Later, R.E. Knowles said of the situation, “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.”<sup>87</sup>

There is much evidence of the bitter conflict between the unionists on Session at Knox’s and their moderator. In fact, it is reported that the meetings often deteriorated into four-hour arguments about church union.<sup>88</sup> On February 8, the nineteen unionist elders offered their resignations, effective April 1. In light of the fact that he was no longer attending Knox’s, William Burnett resigned at once from his position as clerk of Session, although he stated that he would like to remain as its representative elder to the Presbytery of Guelph. Understandably offended by this request, the remaining elders immediately replaced him as clerk and presbytery elder with R.M. Hamilton.<sup>89</sup> Two days later, however, both Burnett and Hamilton turned up at the regular meeting of Presbytery, claiming to represent Knox’s congregation. The two men were given a chance to make their case before the court, and the Presbytery ruled that Knox’s could not change their representative elder.<sup>90</sup> Although the Session declined to send R.M. Hamilton to any more of the meetings that year, they refused to accept the Presbytery’s decision and did not endorse Burnett’s status as representative elder.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>“Knowles and the Cream,” *Star Weekly*, 18 April 1925, 20.

<sup>88</sup>“In Special Articles, Both Sides of Church Union in Galt Discussed,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 17 November 1924, 1, 4.

<sup>89</sup>Session Minutes, 1925 March 8.

<sup>90</sup>UCC Archives, PCC Presbytery of Guelph fonds, 79.143C, Microfilm Reel 2, Meeting Minutes, 1925 March 10.

<sup>91</sup>Session Minutes, 1925 March 27.

During and after the split in Knox's, J.K. Fraser continued to work hard for the preservation of a strong PCC. He traveled widely to encourage struggling congregations them with the promise that there would remain a strong national church. Of the utmost importance, however, was the preservation of a strong congregation in Knox's. Although Fraser was just as happy to see the likes of R.E. Knowles and William Burnett leave, he was still trying to recruit anti-union sympathizers from First Church.<sup>92</sup> Although many did come, the number of arrivals paled in comparison to the number of departures and his most important pastoral task was to encourage those who had stayed behind. On July 5, he organized a rally to lift the spirits of his parishioners. On that occasion, D.G. McQueen of Edmonton was the guest preacher and he congratulated the people for their steadfastness, saying that church union would be judged harshly by history. Also, at that time, Fraser was able to read a letter of encouragement from continuing Presbyterian moderator Ephraim Scott to the congregation.<sup>93</sup>

R.M. Hamilton, the new clerk of Session, reported to the congregational meeting in January 1926, "The year 1925 has been one of the most outstanding in the history of Knox Church."<sup>94</sup> Indeed, while 264 persons had withdrawn their membership from the congregation because of church union, 51 were added, mostly from First, but some also from the congregation in Ayr, which had itself joined the UCC. Nonetheless, the disruption over church union caused a great deal of emotional pain. By the end of 1926, Fraser had resigned to take a smaller congregation near Ottawa, having been burned out

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<sup>92</sup>PCA Papers, 1973-1003-9-4, J.K. Fraser to J.W. MacNamara, 1925 April 29.

<sup>93</sup>"Rally Day Marks Beginning of New Era in Knox Ch.," *Galt Evening Reporter*, 6 July 1925, 1.

<sup>94</sup>Annual Report, 1926.

by the church union controversy.<sup>95</sup> When his successor, William P. Hall, arrived in April 1927, the official history of the congregation said that there “was no visible repair to the damage that had been wrought” by church union and that “morale was at an all time low.”<sup>96</sup> It was slowly during his pastorate between, 1927 and 1934, that the church returned to a degree of normality.

### Conclusion

In 1912, the congregation of Knox’s expressed strong support for the idea of church union. By 1915, however, signs had emerged of a divide in the congregation over the issue. Because its second vote followed very closely the arrival of J.K. Fraser as pastor, fear of disruption in the PCC must have caused this initial increase in opposition to union. Yet, the extent of the later controversy was not primarily due to denominational concerns, but rather to the personality and leadership style of J.K. Fraser. As one congregational history reads, “Knox’s Church in Galt remained as a continuing Presbyterian church largely as a result of Dr. Fraser’s leadership.”<sup>97</sup> Although his arguments were historically and theologically sophisticated, it was the form of their delivery, rather than their content, which had, ultimately, a greater influence on both his supporters and his detractors.

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<sup>95</sup>“Rev. Dr. Fraser Ends Pastorate at Knox Church,” *Galt Evening Reporter*, 29 November 1926, 1.

<sup>96</sup>Sanders, 32.

<sup>97</sup>PCC Archives, Knox’s Galt Presbyterian Church (Cambridge, Ont.) fonds, 1977-4002-1-3, “A History of Knox’s Church, Galt, Ontario,” 17.