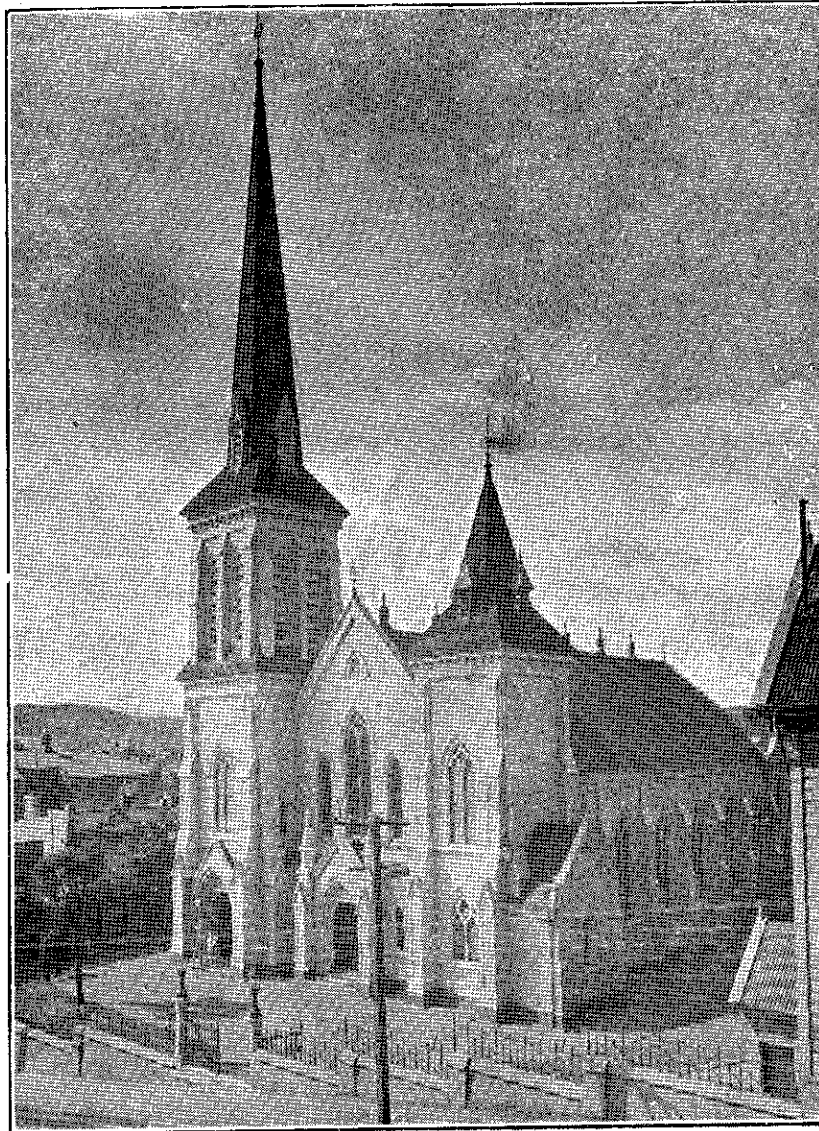




St. John's
Through 100 Years

*A brief account of the first hundred
years of St. John's Presbyterian
Church, Willis Street, Wellington,
New Zealand*

1853 — 1953



FOREWORD

THIS BOOKLET IS NOT A HISTORY. I DOUBT IF ST. JOHN'S history could be written. The fire of 1884 took its toll of much valuable material concerning our beginnings. In the years since many threads have been woven into the story, and many lives, some great in fame, many more only names on Communion Rolls, have been used by God to keep alight the fire on the altar. Let this be their lasting monument. They all belong to that great company, "our fellow-labourers whose names are in the Book of Life".

The Session would place this booklet among the records as an Essay in History—an attempt to trace the course our fathers steered, and to point to some of the landmarks that helped to chart their toiling at the oars. Although, in places, the records may do less than justice to some of our pioneers, nevertheless their works, I believe, will shine out in the following pages. Here is the evidence of God's mighty Hand on this Congregation. Here we experience the sense of His Presence and enabling Grace to men and women who through times often difficult, exposed to the changing fortunes of a Dominion still in-the-making, found strength enough to match their visions, and knew the exhilaration of travelling the hard road with Christ when they could have chosen the smooth one for themselves.

For me one fact glows like a flame in this narrative. St. John's most surely travelled in the Joy of the Lord in days when her people moved out to meet the call of new commitments and the sacrifices that these entailed. The Word that made our Church a beacon and a blessing is this Word: "Whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the Gospel's, the same shall find it." To feel the pulse of that Life in them is both inspiration and summons. May the Presence Who supported them make us equal to His task for us today. May the Grace which sent them to win His Kingdom in other lives be our abundant provision, that we too may come home bringing our sheaves with us.

WILLIAM P. TEMPLE

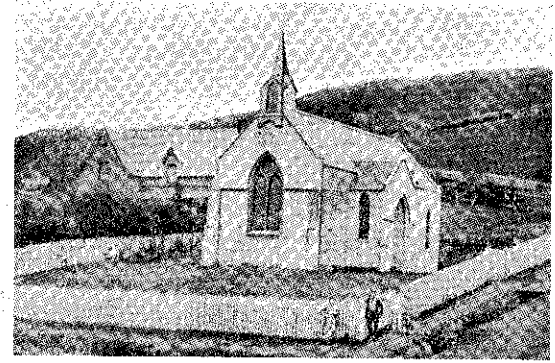
ST. JOHN'S THROUGH 100 YEARS

ORIGIN AND ESTABLISHMENT

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGATION TO BE ESTABLISHED in Wellington, which later became St. Andrew's, had been formed as an offshoot of the Church of Scotland in 1840. A measure of division developed in this congregation in 1851. The arrival in Otago in 1848 of members of the Free Church of Scotland (which had disrupted from the Church of Scotland in 1843) and the inevitable movement of some of these people northward to Wellington in the next few years contributed to the division of Presbyterians in Wellington and no doubt influenced one section of them to look to the Free Church of Scotland for a solution of their disharmonies. They decided to form a second congregation to be within the Free Church.

On November 15, 1851, therefore, a group of 69 people in Wellington sent off a petition to the Free Church of Scotland to send them a regularly ordained Minister of that Church and on November 3, 1853, the Rev. John Moir landed in Wellington. He conducted his first services on November 6 and was formally inducted into his office as Minister of the Free Church of Wellington on November 17. This last date, therefore, marks the formal establishment of the congregation later known as the Willis Street Presbyterian Church and later still as St. John's.

The new congregation had secured the use of the Athenaeum on Lambton Quay (then known as the Beach) and here they held that first service on November 6, 1853, and the regular services for the next three years. In the early months of 1854, a Kirk Session was formed consisting of four elders—Messrs. James Mitchell, Michael Quin, James Blyth and Adam McDonald. Two deacons were also appointed—Messrs. William Lyon and James Wallace. With the setting up of a Session the congregation had achieved the final step in its formation. On the first Sunday in June, 1854, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was dispensed to the new congregation for the first time. Sixty-nine people had signed the originating petition and the membership is recorded



The First Church, 1856

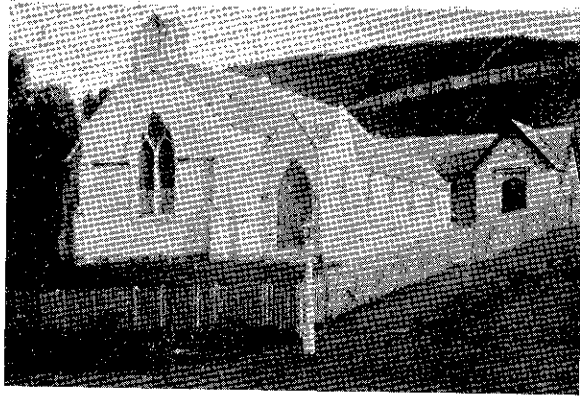
as being 68 in the year or two following Mr. Moir's induction. In 1856 a Church was erected and at the first Communion service in the new building in October, 1856, forty-two persons took Communion.

The congregation, once it moved into its own building, became known as the Willis Street Presbyterian Church. During 1872 the name was changed to St. John's Presbyterian Church, Willis Street, but no record now exists of the circumstances giving rise to this change of name. The roll then stood at 149.

In its first years the congregation grew slowly. As the growth of the city itself accelerated, however, so did the growth of the congregation. In 1878 the Communion Roll stood at 250, which was an increase of 30 on the roll of the preceding year, but before taking up the story of this growth in numbers and activities it will be appropriate to record something of the Church buildings themselves.

THE BUILDINGS

IN 1855 PLANS WERE PREPARED FOR A CHURCH BUILDING WHICH, together with a site, was to cost £1,000. The site was purchased on the corner of Willis Street and Dixon Street where the present Church stands, although the area purchased was less than the area subsequently held on this site. In 1855 the sum of £1,000 meant much more than it does today and was indeed a considerable target for a congregation of sixty to seventy people, but our early Presbyterian congregations had high courage



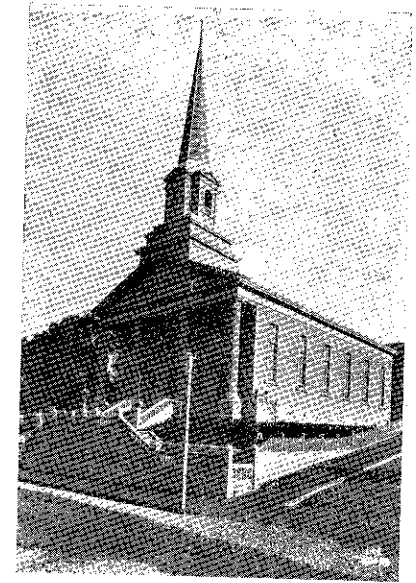
The First Church, with additions, 1866

and a grand capacity for giving both of themselves and of their money. The Church, which would accommodate 200 worshippers (three times the need of the existing congregation), was built in 1856 and the Rev. John Moir preached at the opening service on August 31, 1856. It was a wooden building of neat conventional design with a belfry surmounted by a short steeple. The newspaper of the day described it as "an ornament to the city".

In 1858 the sum of £275 was raised for an addition to the Church building mainly to provide for the growing Sabbath School, but the uncertainties of the Maori Wars and other difficulties delayed the construction until 1866 when an annex was added to the side of the Church. By this time both Sunday School and congregation were growing rapidly and in 1871 a further addition was made.

Even this second addition could not meet the growing requirements of the congregation and by 1874 still more accommodation was necessary. The Church building itself was not twenty years old, but the additions had already detracted from it architecturally and further additions would raise problems of inconvenience as well as further spoiling the appearance of the buildings. In 1874 the congregation of no more than 170 people resolved to pull down the existing buildings and erect a new Church at a cost of some £4,000. Again they planned a Church for a congregation of upwards of three times its existing size,

the new Church being designed to seat 600 people. Of the money required, £2,400 was subscribed immediately (an average of over £12 per church member at a time when £12 was a month's wages for a working man). On June 29, 1875, the foundation stone of the new church was laid by the Marquis of Normanby, then Governor of the Colony, and the church was opened on December 12 in the same year. All agreed that it was a building for St. John's to be proud of. At the same time a new Sunday School was also built beside the Church.



The Second Church, 1875

St. John's had built two churches within twenty years, but it was destined to build three within thirty years. At about 7 a.m. on Friday, May 9, 1884, the new church and adjoining Sunday School hall, both not yet ten years old, were burnt to the ground. It was a devastating blow, but this congregation had no doubts, no backward looks. While the embers were still hot, they began to plan for a new and still larger church and a new and still larger Sunday School hall. The new church, planned to cost £6,800, would require more land and so they bought the adjoining property for £1,500. The house then on it was moved to where it still stands as the Church Officer's house.

In addition to the insurance on the destroyed buildings the congregation had to raise about £5,000. In raising this sum the Church Treasurer, Mr. James Smith (founder of James Smith's Ltd.), proved a tower of strength in rallying the congregation to the effort required. By the time the foundation stone was laid by the Chief Justice, Sir James Prendergast, on May 15, 1885, Mr. James Smith could announce that he had £3,140 in hand or promised. The architect of the new church was Mr.

Thomas Turnbull and the builder was Mr. James Wilson. At the same time the new Sunday School hall (the present Dixon Street Hall) was built.

The new church, with seating for 800, was opened on December 6, 1885. In that year the members of St. John's in full Communion numbered only 360. The records say: "That so small a body of men and women faced and accomplished tasks of such magnitude as the erection of two large churches with halls and Sunday School building in nine years is a circumstance as surprising as it is gratifying." The records appear to have stated it mildly. What courage, what a heart this congregation had!

In 1901 gaslight was installed in the Church and Sunday School and it is interesting to learn that, with the choice of electricity or gas, they chose the latter. Electric lighting and heating was not installed until 1927. In 1902, when the Sunday School buildings were extended, a Social Parlour was provided in the basement below the hall and was referred to as "commodious, handsomely furnished, well lit and warmed. . . ."

Until 1929 the congregation derived a certain amount of revenue from letting the hall and other rooms in the Sunday School building. In that year, however, the unimproved value of the Church property was raised from £1,825 to £4,300, and the consequential increase in rates on the premises, if let, made it inexpedient to continue the practice.

FEATURES OF SPECIAL INTEREST

THE CHURCH AS IT STANDS TODAY HAS MUCH OF SPECIAL interest in it—things which have a history behind them, which mark great events and great people.

First for mention should, of course, be the organ. When the new Church was built in 1885 it had room for the installation of an organ in the choir gallery and Mr. James Smith was determined to see an organ, and a fine one, installed. He made it his personal mission to raise the money and to secure a worthy instrument, and in 1886 a particularly fine instrument was secured from Lewis and Co., London, at a cost of £1,600. Mr. James Smith had gone far afield in his efforts to raise this money and by

the time the organ was installed he had a large part of it in hand and a number of members of the congregation lent the balance free of interest until the whole amount was subscribed. The installing of this organ in St. John's was in fact a community as much as a congregational donation. The total cost, including installation, was £1,859, and of this amount £807 came from outside the congregation (including some £200 in donations from London). £537 was raised by concerts and recitals and the balance was contributed directly by members of the congregation. But behind the gifts stands the foresight, the enthusiasm and the energy of one man. The organ, which has won very high praise from overseas visitors to New Zealand, is, in effect if not in fact, the memorial to Mr. James Smith. His son, Mr. A. P. Smith, also an office-bearer of St. John's for many years, continued to have a very special interest in "his father's organ" and on his death in 1948 left the sum of £1,000 for its renovation. In 1910 the family of Mr. James Smith presented the Church with the three Pulpit chairs "in memory of their father who served the Church in many offices and for many years and in whose heart its welfare ever held a foremost place."

When the War Memorial for the 1914-1918 war was unveiled in 1920—the two brass tablets, one on either side of the pulpit, bearing the names of those who served and those who made the supreme sacrifice—a member of the congregation (anonymously at the time) gave the two beautiful stained glass windows, one at each side of the organ, as part of the memorial. It may now be recorded that the gift came from the Hon. J. G. W. Aitken.

The other stained glass window in the Church, the "Good Samaritan" window in the north wall above the gallery, is a most beautiful piece of work. It was dedicated on July 15, 1923, in memory of the Hon. J. G. W. Aitken, the grand old man of St. John's first century, who died in August, 1921. The following brief tribute to him is taken from the 1922 Report of the Session: "Mr. Aitken's labours were abundant; in Parliament, in the municipality, in the sphere of education, and in countless philanthropic enterprises and agencies he strove incessantly to serve his day and generation. His private charities were as numerous as his public service. . . . But Mr. Aitken's devotion was above all to the Church and in her work he found his chief joy. To his own congregation and to the Church in general he