

## The Seraphimite, Independent Greek, Presbyterian and United Churches

In March 1903, Stephan Ustvolsky, a Russian Orthodox priest who had been living as a monk on Mount Athos, arrived in Winnipeg claiming to be Seraphim, 'Bishop and Metropolitan of the Orthodox Russian Church for the whole of America.' Although a man of faith and a fine preacher with a melodious voice, few believed he had been consecrated bishop on Mount Athos, as he claimed. In Winnipeg, Seraphim proceeded to ordain cantors, deacons and others selected by their communities into the priesthood of what he called the 'All-Russian Patriarchal Orthodox Church,' popularly known as the Seraphimite Church. In spite of widespread doubts about Seraphim's legitimacy and authority, at the outset his Church had broad popular appeal. Many Ukrainian immigrants were attracted to a bishop who ordained poor and humble men like the 'simple uneducated fishermen' whom Christ had selected as Apostles. The more radical community leaders, who suspected the motives of French Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox missionaries, and rejected Ukrainian Catholic clericalism, hoped that with better leadership the Seraphimite movement would evolve into a progressive, democratic and independent Ukrainian church.



**Ivan Bodrug 1906**  
(UCEC)

Encouraged by Kyrylo (Cyril) Genik, the most influential Ukrainian in Winnipeg at the time, Ivan Bodrug and Ivan Negrich, two young men who had qualified as village school teachers in the old country and briefly attended classes at Manitoba College in 1899, presented themselves for ordination. A few months later, in May, with the assistance of Presbyterian professors at Manitoba College, the newly ordained Bodrug and Negrich secretly drafted the constitution for a new institution - the Independent Greek Church. The new church would be independent of all ties with the Vatican, the Russian Holy Synod, and the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs, although, in the short term, it would retain the Eastern Christian liturgy and ritual so as not to alienate traditionalist Ukrainian peasant immigrants. From the outset, however, the church would espouse evangelical principles and stress the ethical teachings of Christ. It would also promote equality between the clergy and the laity; adopt a democratic form of self-government and administration; and encourage literacy through Bible readings.



**Theodore Stefanik**  
(UCEC)

During the ensuing year, unbeknownst to Seraphim, Bodrug and Negrich recruited men who shared their reformist Protestant views into the priesthood of the Seraphimite Church and waited for an opportunity to break with the eccentric bishop and seize control of the movement. In the meantime, Bodrug and Theodore Stefanik, an electrician by trade, preached and held services in the Immigration Hall and in a tent on a vacant lot at 479 Stella Avenue. By July 1903, a congregation had been organized and plans to build a church were underway. Finally, on 13 December 1903, a small frame building on the east side of McGregor Street between Manitoba and

Pritchard Avenues, that may have been called the Holy Ghost church, was officially blessed by Seraphim and opened for worship.

Several months later, while Seraphim was in St Petersburg, trying unsuccessfully to win recognition of his mission from the Russian Holy Synod, Bodrug and his followers called a convention, adopted the new constitution, and

announced the formation of the Independent Greek Church. Seraphim excommunicated the Protestant reformers from his church in September 1904 after returning empty-handed from Russia, and by January 1905 the schism within his movement was complete. Seraphim was left with a handful of poorly educated priests and few followers. In November 1904 he started building his notorious 'tin can cathedral' at the corner of King Street and Stella Avenue, attracting more curious onlookers than worshippers. A weekly newspaper, *Pravoslaviie* (Orthodoxy), printed with mismatched fonts of every size imaginable also failed to attract adherents, and in February 1908, a broken Seraphim left Winnipeg for California, never to return. Meanwhile, the Independent Greek Church, with Bodrug as its superintendent, received moral and material assistance from the Presbyterians - who established special classes for prospective missionaries at Manitoba College - and experienced several years of rapid growth, winning adherents in all three Prairie provinces. In 1907, the Church had 15-20,000 followers served by 24 Ukrainian missionaries, including 11 full-time pastors who received salaries of \$480 annually from the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions. By 1911-12, the Presbyterians were spending about \$16,000 annually on the experiment.



**Independent Greek Church convention 1905 (UCEC)**

The Winnipeg congregation, under the care of Bodrug and his father-in-law, Oleksa (Alexander) Bachynsky, an experienced old-country cantor and choir director, fared well at the outset. A new and larger church - the Independent Greek Church of Our Saviour - was erected in the traditional Ukrainian style at the northeast corner of McGregor and Pritchard during the summer of 1907, and a reading club, the Canadian Star Association (*Tovarystvo Kanadiiska Zoria*), was established in the old building, providing congregation members with a reading room, access to several newspapers, and free English-language instruction on weekday evenings. By the winter of 1907-8, however, Winnipeg had become the focal point of a dispute concerning the pace of reform. A small contingent of recently recruited, well-educated missionaries, led by Zygmund

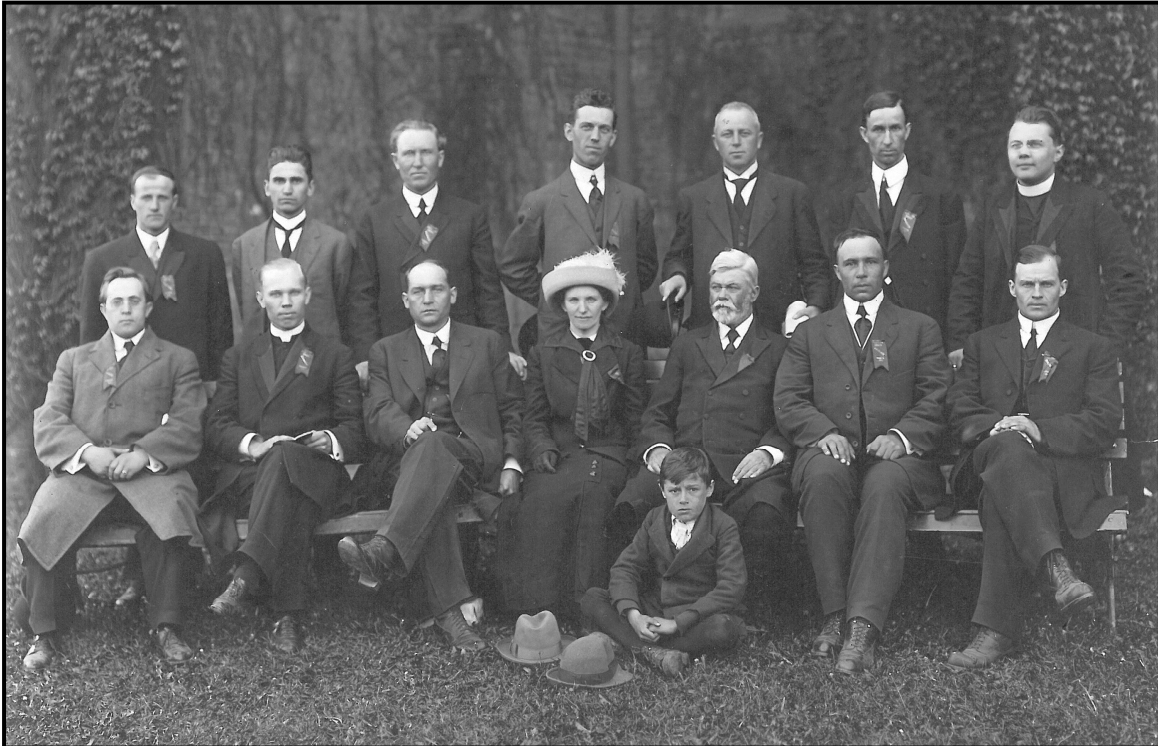
Bychynsky, who had studied at the University of Lviv and at the Presbyterian Seminary in Pittsburgh, pressed for elimination of the Eastern liturgy and immediate reform of the church. Bodrug, on the other hand, ever mindful of the peasant immigrants' traditionalism, saw the new church as a long-term project that would require many years to reform. Although he won this round because several of the church's prominent Presbyterian sponsors took his side, the controversy caused turmoil within the Winnipeg congregation and Bodrug, accompanied by a few like-minded missionaries, briefly left Winnipeg for Newark, New Jersey, where efforts to establish a similar movement among Ukrainian immigrants were underway.



**Seraphim's Holy Ghost church and Independent Greek Church of Our Saviour (UCEC)**

When Bodrug returned to Winnipeg in the spring of 1910 at the urging of the Presbyterian Home Mission Committee, the local congregation and the Church as a whole were in a state of crisis. The period of growth and expansion had come to an end, clerical discipline was collapsing, and many congregations were divided into traditionalist and reformist factions. Dmytro Yaremii, Bodrug's successor in Winnipeg, had left the Church and joined the Russian Orthodox mission. Most of the church's Presbyterian backers, who regarded it as a vehicle of Canadianization designed to promote Protestant beliefs, British values and the English language among Ukrainian immigrants, were also growing impatient. The Independent Greek Church struck them as an unmitigated failure. They could not understand why the Church had not been reformed and, with public opinion among Ukrainian Canadians increasingly shaped by secular leaders, primarily socialists and nationalists, rather than Independent Greek Church ministers, they concluded that the rationale for the Church's existence had disappeared. As a result, the Presbyterian Home Mission Committee reversed its tactics in the summer of 1910 and began to encourage Independent Greek Church ministers to introduce reforms immediately. This strategy only deepened the chasm between traditionalists and reformers within the Church, and induced Ukrainian critics of the Church to label Bodrug and his colleagues 'traitors,' 'mercenaries' and 'assimilators' who were at the mercy of their 'Presbyterian masters' and therefore not

'independent.' When critics who were not content to hurl epithets provoked fistcuffs at Manitoba College, while a deranged fanatic murdered a missionary near Goodeve, Saskatchewan in the winter of 1912, the Presbyterian Home Mission Committee decided to withdraw its support from the Independent Greek Church and "go at this work along distinctly Presbyterian lines." In August 1912 the special classes at Manitoba College were cancelled, financial assistance was withdrawn from the Independent Greek Church, and its congregations were placed under local presbyteries. Independent Greek Church clergymen with at least four years of theological training could apply for positions as Presbyterian ministers, those less qualified were eligible to apply for missionary work. In October, 19 applicants were admitted into the Presbyterian fold, but few were able to convince more than a minority of their flock to follow them.



**Independent Greek Church ministers 1911 (UCEC)**

The transition from the Independent Greek Church to Presbyterianism did not go smoothly in the Winnipeg congregation. After reformers took down the icons and removed the altar, traditionalists retaliated by taking control of the building and padlocking the church. Eventually, the latter relented, abandoned the movement, and returned to Ukrainian Catholic or Russian Orthodox parishes. By May 1913 the building was securely in Presbyterian hands and Presbyterian services were being held for a much smaller congregation. Obtaining and retaining a permanent Ukrainian Presbyterian minister also proved to be difficult, and for much of 1914-15 the church stood vacant, re-opening only in October 1916 when the formation of a Ukrainian Presbyterian congregation was formally announced. Simultaneously, the Ivan Franko Reading Association was established in the old building adjacent to the church and English-language classes attended by 20 were offered in the evenings. Still, during the next few years the congregation remained in a precarious state without a permanent minister, prompting some members to attend services and participate in activities at the nearby Robertson Memorial

Presbyterian Church and Institute, which had been erected in 1911 at 648 Burrows Avenue and McKenzie Street.

From 1921 to 1929 Robert George Katsunoff, a Bulgarian missionary educated in Sofia, Berlin, Constantinople and at the Presbyterian seminary and musical conservatory in Toronto, served as pastor of the Ukrainian congregation. In 1922 the congregation became affiliated with the



**Rev Elias Eustace  
(UCEC)**

Ukrainian Evangelical Alliance, an umbrella organization founded in New York City to unite all Ukrainian Evangelical Protestants. After most Canadian Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists united in 1925, the Ukrainian congregation became part of the United Church. By 1929, when Katsunoff was replaced by Elias Eustace (Eustafiewicz), a Ukrainian pastor, the congregation had a membership of over 100 families, a Sunday School (taught by English-speaking teachers) attended by 105 children, a Canadian Girls in Training branch with 36 teenaged members, a Young People's Society of 35, and a 30-member mission band. Other activities included a story hour, a Bible class, a Scout Troop, a Mothers' Club and a choir. The congregation had also produced the first Ukrainian United Church deaconess in Canada (Dorothy N Kushner).

More vibrant than it had been in years, the congregation was also being drawn into the orbit of Robertson Memorial with its superior facilities and varied programs. After 1929, Ukrainian church services were held at Robertson Memorial Church during the cold fall and winter months, while most social, cultural and recreational activities were gradually transferred to the spacious and well-equipped Robertson Institute.

-- Orest T. Martynowych

### **Books and articles**

Orest T. Martynowych, *Ukrainians in Canada: The Formative Years, 1891-1924* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, University of Alberta, 1991).

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Geraldine C. Russin, "The Ukrainian United Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1903-1961: The History of a Unique Canadian Religious Experience." Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1999.

### **Websites**

Robertson Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Winnipeg Historical Buildings inventory  
<http://winnipeg.ca/ppd/historic/pdf-inventory/Burrows648-overview.pdf>

Robertson Memorial Institute  
Winnipeg Historical Buildings inventory  
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