St Mary the Protectress Ukrainian Greek Orthodox church

A distinctly Ukrainian Orthodox church did not appear in Canada until July 1918 and it did not have a congregation in Winnipeg prior to 1923.

In July 1918, dissident Ukrainian Catholic laymen, who had been nurtured on the democratic and populist ideals of Ukrainian Radicalism and National Democracy, established the **Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada** at a convention in Saskatoon. Led by young professionals, teachers and small businessmen, who resented clerical tutelage and were convinced that foreign-dominated Catholic, Russian Orthodox and Protestant churches were inimical to Ukrainian interests, the Church's founders wanted a national (narodna) church free of foreign control and governed democratically by the laity and the clergy. The new church, they decided, would enter into communion with the Eastern Orthodox churches, accept their dogma and rites, elect bishops at a general council (sobor) of clergy and lay delegates, ordain married men into the priesthood, and allow congregations to control their own property and participate in the appointment and dismissal of pastors. From 1919 to 1924, the fledgling Church was under the spiritual wing of Metropolitan Germanos Shegedi of New York City, the American exarch of the Antiochian (Syrian) Orthodox Church. The day-to-day administration of the church was left in the hands of an elected consistory of two priests and three laymen. In 1924, a general council of the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church elected its first Ukrainian primate, Archbishop Ioann Theodorovich, who had been dispatched to North America by the new Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Established in Kyiv in 1921 by laymen and lower clergy, who elected and consecrated their hierarchy without the participation of any bishops, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church lacked canonical legitimacy in the eyes of the Orthodox world. Nevertheless, the founders of the Canadian church had few qualms about Theodorovich’s status because they were guided by an ideology that stressed democracy and Ukrainian self-reliance, and prized autocephaly (independence) above canonicity. By the winter of 1923-4, the church had ten priests and about fifty congregations in the three Prairie Provinces.

Ironically, Winnipeg - the home of some of the Church's most prominent founders (teacher Wasyl Swystun, lawyer Jaroslaw W Arsenych, politician Taras D Ferley) and the seat of the Church's consistory and its young administrator, the Rev Semen Sawchuk - did not begin to organize a Ukrainian Greek Orthodox congregation until the fall of 1923. No doubt, the fact that by 1918 Winnipeg's Ukrainians could choose among two large Ukrainian Catholic parishes, one Russian Orthodox and one independent (Bukovynian) Orthodox congregation, and a Ukrainian Presbyterian congregation, contributed to this anomaly. When efforts to build a Ukrainian Greek Orthodox congregation around the independent St Michael's Bukovynian Orthodox church in Point Douglas failed, there was no alternative but to establish a new congregation. The Rev Sawchuk was invited to be the congregation's first pastor; temporary arrangements were made with St Peter's Anglican Church, at the corner of Selkirk Avenue and Aikins Street, to hold Sunday services; and on 7 January 1924, Christmas Day according to the Julian calendar, the first Ukrainian Greek Orthodox, Ukrainian-language liturgy was celebrated in Winnipeg. Wasyl
Swystun, one of the most prominent founders of the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church in 1918, directed the choir.

In May 1924, the congregation purchased 10 lots for $2,600 where Burrows and Magnus Avenues intersect with Sinclair Street. Construction of a church dedicated to St Mary the Protectress was underway by July 1925. The building plans were prepared by Semen Kowbel, master builder, amateur stage director and playwright, who also supervised construction, which relied significantly on volunteer labour. On 16 August, Archbishop Theodorovich, in Winnipeg for his annual visitation, blessed the cornerstone and then celebrated the liturgy accompanied by four priests while the choir, conducted by Wasyl Swystun, sang liturgical songs arranged by Bortniansky, Koshetz and Stetsenko. By November 1925 the foundations and basement had been completed and the congregation moved into the building (although the church's upper level would not be ready until 1951). Several weeks later, in January 1926, the first marriage ceremony performed in the church involved two public school teachers, emblematic of the congregation's upwardly mobile, lower middle class, membership.

Although it had a Sunday school, attended by about 150 children in 1926, St Mary the Protectress did not offer many devotional activities. However, it soon became the hub of many cultural and educational activities. A substantial number of congregation members had belonged to the Maria Zankovetska Educational and Dramatic Society and the Boyan Society during their heyday a decade earlier; by the winter of 1925-6 the Ukrainian National Home Choral and Dramatic Society was staging popular plays and operettas like Starytsky's Chornomortsi (The Black Sea Cossacks) and Oi ne khody Hrytsiu (Don't Go to Parties, Hryts) in the church's basement hall to raise funds for further construction. Concerts commemorating Ukrainian cultural and political figures and major historical events, lectures on topics ranging from popular science to Ukrainian poetry, and debates, including the first inter-provincial student debates, were also held on Sunday afternoons and evenings. In particular, congregation leaders had a strong commitment to preserving the memory of the Ukrainian People's Republic (Ukrainska narodna respublyka) that existed briefly in 1918-20. When Alexander Koshetz and the internationally acclaimed Ukrainian National Chorus performed at Winnipeg's Walker Theatre for the second time in November 1926, chorus members attended Sunday services at St Mary's and the renowned basso profundo, Hlib Shandrowsky (Glib Chandrowsky), sang the Apostle's Creed (Viruiu). To endow cultural-educational work with direction and continuity, in October 1927 the congregation (re-)established the Boyan Society, with Maksym Pasichniak, the first Boyan Society's musical director, resuming his duties. Members included veterans of older choral and dramatic societies and young people drawn from the Sunday school class. The society maintained a library and held choir practices once a week, every week of the year. Sunday afternoon lectures and choral concerts were also a weekly event during the fall and winter season, and five or six plays were staged annually. Indeed, by 1929, no Ukrainian parish or congregation in the city could rival St Mary the Protectress insofar as cultural activities were concerned.
Books and articles


*Iuvileina knyha; pivtolittia Ukrainskoi Hreko-Pravoslavnoi Tserkvy v Kanadi* (Winnipeg, 1968)