Interview with Charles (Chuck) Robertson D.Min

Chaplain to the St Andrew's Society of Los Angeles

(continued)

I was born in Pennsylvania and my family moved to Indianapolis, when I was ten. After finishing high school then Army service at Ft. Ord and graduating from Indiana University in Bloomington (IUB), I came west to San Francisco Theological Seminary in Marin County. My first ministry was as Campus Minister for Marin County Council of Churches at the College of Marin in Kentfield CA. My former wife and I then spent five years in Poland on a Presbyterian Church program, studying at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków; then teaching English at the Institute of Foreign Languages of the Silesian University in Katowice. Upon my return to the US, I served as pastor of a small country church, then of a small city congregation, in Southern Indiana. We ultimately moved to Flint, Michigan where I served an urban congregation for 14 years.

I was called to Los Angeles from Flint in the beginning of 1999 to serve as Pastor of Wilshire Presbyterian Church. In Michigan I had been a member of the Clan Donnachaidh (Donna-key) Society. Inasmuch as the majority of their members were in the Detroit area, I could rarely attend meetings. Yet I always looked forward to meeting up with them at the Scottish Highland Games on the campus of Alma College in Alma MI which calls itself "Scotland USA".



Upon moving to LA, I transferred my membership to the Clan Donnachaidh Society of Southern California. There I heard of the St. Andrew's Society of Los Angeles (SASLA) and immediately joined. Due to the demands on my time as an active pastor, I was unable to be a full participant in either society other than for the several Highland Games here in Southern California. After my retirement from active ministry in late 2008, I had more time to participate in both societies. I served a few terms on the SASLA Board and then as Vice President when J. David MacPherson was President. With the election of Ian Skone-Rees as President of the Society in 2014, Ian graciously invited me to serve as the SASLA Chaplain and, delighted to be asked I, of course, accepted!

The Robertson clan has roots that go back to Robert the Bruce in the 14th century and the Wars of Scottish Independence. With such a rich resource of Scottish history, as an individual with academic curiosity, I am sure you have explored your own family genealogy. Tell me a little about your family heritage.

Clan Donnaichadh (Children of Duncan or Duncansons), still the only Scottish Clan to use its Gaelic name, goes back to our first chief, Duncan Reamhair (the Stout) de Atholia, (1275-1355), who supported, fought with, and was a close friend of Robert the Bruce. Yet, we only became known as Robertsons after our fourth chief, Robert Riabhach (Grizzled), who helped capture one of the assassins of King James I, Sir Robert Graham, in 1437, for which King James II awarded him the Barony of Struan (originally Strowan) in 1451. Thus our Clan motto "Glory is the Reward of Valor".

My own family line comes through my Grandfather Robertson. My Grandmother Robertson was from England. My mother's side is half German and half a mix of French and English. Yet, when we young kids would ask Mom what our ethic heritage was, she always replied, "Scottish!" Yet I would not be here without the joining of Robertson men in marriage that brought a number of other clans and families into our genealogy – Ferguson, Duff, Anderson, Falls, Brown, Carmichael, Henderson – as spouses. As to our family "seat," it was at Logierait, just south of Pitlochry at the confluence of the Tay and the Tummel, where many of my ancestors are buried in the churchyard. Logierait was long the seat of the Atholl family's regality courts and had a prison from which Rob Roy MacGregor escaped in 1717.

In 1888 my Great Grandfather James Robertson brought his wife and seven children, ages 3 - 18 years over from Scotland to Pittsburgh, sailing on the steamship *Scandanavian* from Glascow to Philadelphia, then boarding a train to Pittsburgh, and there they settled. My great grandfather, then 45, and my grandfather, also James, then 18, went right to work in the steel mills. My great grandfather was a master blacksmith who had a "smiddy" in East Haugh (Hock), south of Pitlochry, then moved to Clunie and opened a smithy in Willamsburgh, Forneth, across the lake from Clunie. He was also an elder in the Presbyterian Church of Clunie. When he brought his family to the U.S., he listed his occupation at the Port of Philadelphia as "Butcher" and their destination as "Chicago." Now why would a master blacksmith claim to be a butcher and say he and his family were going

to Chicago (the stockyard capital of the world)? I believe it says something about the poor economy in Scotland at that time, even for blacksmiths, and his determination to find work in order to support his family. Fortunately his brother John, my great great uncle, was already working in Pittsburgh and encouraged James to join him in the steel mills. Besides, as a blacksmith, he was used to the heat!

With or without intention, religion seems to always play an appreciable role in the historical development of any nation. Scotland has been no exception, but perhaps a notable example. As the Catholic Church was losing influence on the day to day life of the average Highlander, the Presbyterian Church stepped in to promote a more direct form of worship along with a significant improvement in education for the 'common man'. As someone who has committed his life both to promoting heritage and religion, I would love to hear your thoughts on this!

First a bit of my faith history and its heritage! The original Christian Church in Scotland was the Celtic Church. The ascendancy of the Catholic Church dates from the time of Queen Margaret (1045-1093), wife of King Malcolm III. Yet the Scottish Church was always relatively independent of Rome. With the Reformation of Scotland, begun by John Knox in 1560, two Protestant Churches, Episcopal (known as "the English Church" for its origins in England) and Presbyterian (which became the Church of Scotland in 1560), competed for the loyalty of Scottish Christians in the Lowlands and Eastern Highlands. The Reformation failed to reach the Western Highlands and Western Isles where the Catholic Church remained dominant. North of the Tay, the Eastern Highlands were almost entirely Episcopalian except for a belt which remained Catholic. These Scottish Episcopalians were ardent Jacobites. It was only *after* the Battle of Culloden in 1746 that the Presbyterian Church was established in the Eastern Highlands.

After Culloden, the British Government passed the Act of Proscription, which made the wearing of Highland dress and tartan, as well as the playing of the bagpipes, forbidden. Indeed, the British Government was determined to destroy the power of the clan chiefs and root out the Episcopal Church by promoting the Presbyterian Church and its missionaries in the Highlands as a means to "civilize the wild, rebellious Scots." Thus, as far back as we presently have been able to trace my family's Robertson line, to 1777, it is Presbyterian.

In contrast to Rome based Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church has been noted for its representative form of government, with its congregations and higher bodies (presbyteries, synods, and a General Assembly) governed by elected elders, with equal numbers of lay elders and clergy elders. What also was significant not only for the Highlands, but for all of Scotland was the church's emphasis on lay education, which contributed to the cultural, social, and economic development of the nation itself. This form of the church (Presbyterian) is what immigrant Scots and Scots-Irish brought to America. Both my parents families were part of a family of Presbyterian churches which eventually united to form what is known today as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). One might say then that I'm Presbyterian "by birth!" Yet I only made a real commitment to the faith, church, and ministry in my late 20's.

The Presbyterian Church recognizes the Kirkin' O' the Tartans in U.S. as a celebration, in a sense, of the stubborn, persistent and unyielding spirit of the Scots. It is an endorsement of the unflagging courage and faith of the ordinary folk who had little to lose and lost it all. Can you tell us more about the need to keep the spirit alive through our annual church service, in a Society such as St Andrews.

Certainly! It is in the context of worship that SASLA celebrates the Kirkin' o' the Tartans at the Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church each year. It is the one faith-based event that SASLA celebrates. As previously mentioned it is important because it ties us to a Highland tradition that began as a response to the proscription of the Tartan and other elements of Highland culture. Highlanders would bring pieces of their Tartan to the Kirk (Church) to be secretly blessed (kirkin'ed) at a particular point of the service. Yet it is also a uniquely Scottish-American custom, as the contemporary celebration was begun by an immigrant Scot, the Rev. Dr. Peter Marshall, Pastor of the New York Ave. Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. and Chaplain of the U.S. Senate. At a service on April 27, 1941, in order to build American support for raising funds and war relief for the British, he gave a sermon entitled, "The Kirkin' o' the Tartans," and a tradition began (the U.S. did not enter World War II until after Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941). It then spread rapidly in the U.S. and Canada. Since then, the service has become an act of faith, heritage, and patriotism. I have always tried to acknowledge this in SASLA's annual service by recognizing not only the clans and Tartans present, but the Tartans and mottos of the American Armed Forces.

Although the St Andrews Society prides itself in honoring the history and culture of the past, especially that which occurred in the "Old Country," it is also important to integrate that of "the diaspora" into the present. To attract and include the "younger" generation has been somewhat of a challenge to our leadership! The challenges of the clans and glens have been replaced by that of a digital world and in a sense, a virtual reality of relationships and friendships. Do you have any thoughts on this?

I have continually been impressed with the Society's Presidential leadership during my 20 years of membership in SASLA, beginning with the late Dr. John Benton through those of John Lowry, David, Ian, and now Kimberlee Bradford. Kimberlee, if I am not mistaken, is the first female president of SASLA and among the first for any St. Andrew's Society. *Vive la femme!* In the last two presidencies, we have experienced a quantum leap forward for SASLA, in terms of new members, membership involvement, and relationships with other groups. Ian has connected us with a number of British-American associations in the LA area. He has nourished a relationship with the British Consulate where we have held our last two Spring Garden Parties. Ian and the Board have also invited in representatives of the Royal Air Force contingent at Edwards Air Force Base just north of LA, to our traditional celebrations. He has also spearheaded our involvement in supporting the Saban Research Institute of Children's Hospital of Los Angeles. In many of these new relationships, we have benefitted from the creativity, contacts, and strong organizational skills of Kimberlee. She has developed our connection with the cast and crew of the

Outlander series and she came up with the brilliant idea of periodic Meet-Ups in Scottish/British locales. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic shut-downs, Kimberlee has also organized virtual Meet-Ups on Zoom and increased our presence on social media. In this she has taken our activities and thinking into the 21st century. As she and the board face unusual challenges, they deserve our full support and prayers as, together, they guide us through difficult times.

From Culloden to Covid-19, from Old World to New World, from reality to virtual world, the St. Andrew's Society draws from a rich heritage as it moves into a promising future. Do you have any last words to guide the Society as it formulates its vision for the future?

The life of any voluntary organization, be it a congregation or a society such as St. Andrew's, depends primarily on three objectives. First is being guided by and faithful to the purposes of the organization. Second is serving the needs of its members. Third is remembering that the future of any such organization is eventually in the hands of newer and younger members. In my time with SASLA, we have done well in accomplishing the first two, and more recently we are doing very well in achieving the third. We are not only drawing in new members of Scottish descent, but we have seen that many folks who may not be of Scottish heritage have a deep interest in things Scottish and become active and loyal members of the Society. Along with our officers, trustees and present members, I bid them special welcome!

What a wonderful heritage and family history. We are so fortunate that we have you as part of the story of The St Andrews Society in Los Angeles. You have been somewhat of a guidepost to keep us in touch with our own roots. Thank you again, Chuck!

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