

Struggles to Achieve: The Rev. James Nisbet and the Foreign Missions Committee of the Canada Presbyterian Church

In 1861, the Rev. James Nisbet was asked by the Foreign Missions Committee (FMC) of the Canada Presbyterian Church (CPC) if he would serve as a missionary to the Red River Settlement in what is today Manitoba. The mission had two purposes: 1. to assist the Rev. John Black in ministering to the local Presbyterian settlers, and 2. to plan and establish a mission to the First Nations People in the area. It would be the first mission by the CPC to a non-Christian population, and hence it was placed under the umbrella of the Foreign Missions Committee. Nisbet was uncertain and took his time to consider it, but with a sense of duty, he accepted¹.

During his first year at the Red River Settlement, he earned the respect of the local settlers. He worked well with John Black, and the two together laid the groundwork for a mission. At his own expense, Nisbet made the trek back to Toronto in June 1863 to place the needs of this venture before the Synod. He addressed the gathered members twice but seems to have moved them little. After discussion, the Synod made the following judgement, that “while desiring, so soon as circumstances will permit, to fulfill their obligations to the Indians, yet, taking into account the state of the Foreign Missions Fund, and the existing demands upon it, would not deem it advisable, for the present, to incur any new liabilities for this purpose”. One can imagine the disappointment Nisbet must have felt.

Nevertheless, he and Black continued to develop and refine their plans and in 1865 the Synod finally gave its approval. In June of 1866, after much preparation, Nisbet, his wife, and baby daughter, set off on a 900km journey through the wilderness, eventually settling at what is today Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Over the next 8 years he and his wife Mary put enormous

¹ James Nisbet to Robert F. Burns, 12 September 1861, Nisbet Papers, The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives (PCA).

effort into their work – struggling through exhaustion, disease, isolation, and criticism. By 1874 both were dead; worn out in body and mind.

Much has been written on James Nisbet over the past 140 years. Most writings come to the same conclusion: they give praise to his personal dedication and hard-work; they give credit to him for founding the town of Prince Albert; and they note the many trials and difficulties he faced. Most, however, also view the mission itself as having only partial success. This has been attributed to several causes, some more worthy than others². However, in the book “A Goodly Heritage” the authors identify what seems to have been a pivotal reason - a distinct lack of support given to Nisbet by the FMC.

As satisfying as this is, lifting the blame off Nisbet’s shoulders and onto a central committee, it still begs the question why? Why did the FMC not support him further? By looking more closely at Nisbet’s life and work within this wider context of the work of the FMC the following paper will hope to answer this question. It will start with a brief biography of James Nisbet up to the year he left for the Red River Settlement. This will be followed by a summary of the origins and development of the FMC up to the same year. The third, and largest section, will then look at Nisbet and the FMC in tandem from 1861-1874, with the goal of better understanding James Nisbet, his work, the criticism he faced, and perhaps most importantly, the lack of support he received from the FMC.

² One valid reason noted by many authors (McBeth, 1912; McKellar, 1924; McNab, 1933; Smiley, 1993; Marnoch 1994) was the increasing immigration into the area, combined with a westward migration of the buffalo herds, both of which caused the local First Nations people to move away from the vicinity. A second reason given, and one with less validity, is a lack of imagination and drive on Nisbet’s part, which was raised by Gary Abrams (1966). Robert Dunning (1966) and the History Committee of St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church, Prince Albert (2006), however, noted the sheer quantity of work required of Nisbet as a defining cause, coupled with the fact that the wider Church was late in sending him assistance, a reason which was further expanded upon by Rudy Platiel and Helen Goggin in their book “A Goodly Heritage” (1984).

Brief Biography of James Nisbet

James Nisbet was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1823. His father, Thomas, being a carpenter and shipbuilder, passed these manual skills on to Nisbet who would use them throughout his life.³ His faith too, must have been developed from an early age - as a young teenager he served as Superintendent of the local Sabbath School and at 18 he walked with his older brother Henry all the way to London with hopes of joining the London Missionary Society. Henry was accepted, but on account of his age, James was not⁴. It must have been a devastating blow to a young man's dreams. Just a few years later, however, he and his father and two sisters left Scotland and immigrated to Canada, settling in Oakville.

At this time, there was a certain level of religious upheaval in Scotland. In 1843, the Great Disruption happened when a large number of ministers and elders walked away from the established Church of Scotland to form the new Free Church of Scotland. Sympathy for this cause in Canada led to a similar split here and in 1844 a new "Free Church" in Canada was formed.⁵ One of the first acts of this new church was to establish its own theological college, Knox College, in Toronto. James Nisbet, newly arrived from Scotland enrolled in the first class, and attended from 1844 until 1849. Some of his fellow students at the College would go on to have a large impact on his life: John Black was in the same class as Nisbet but five years his senior - he would become Nisbet's close friend and colleague in the Red River Settlement; Robert F. Burns, three years younger, would serve as convener of the FMC at the time when

³ Smiley, Bill, "The Most Good to the Indians: The Rev. James Nisbet and the Prince Albert Mission", *Saskatchewan History*, Vol. 46, No. 2, (Fall 1994): 34.

⁴ John McNab, *They Went Forth* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart Ltd., 1933): 80.

⁵ The official name of the new church was "The Presbyterian Church of Canada" but it was commonly referred to as the "Free Church" in Canada.

Nisbet first went to the Red River; and finally William MacLaren, also three years younger, who would become convener after Burns, and a person with whom Nisbet would have great frustration later on.⁶

In 1850 Nisbet was called to Knox Presbyterian Church, Oakville, where he served for the following 12 years. During these years he was an active member of the Presbytery and served for a number of years as convener of its Home Missions Committee. With his carpentry skills and mindset, his background in teaching children, and his service in Home Missions, Nisbet likely would have gone on to a successful ministry growing the Church in Canada. Instead, in the late summer of 1861, his old college mate Robert F. Burns asked if he would be a missionary to the settlers and aboriginal people of the Red River Settlement. Nisbet noted that if it was up to him he would decline, but if it was a true call, he would accept call.

Origins and Development of the Foreign Missions Committee (FMC)

Like Nisbet, the FMC has an interesting history up to this point as well. Its story begins in 1844, the same year Nisbet arrived in Canada and the same year the “Free Church” in Canada was formed. Right from the start, the new church had a missionary spirit. At its second meeting, in October 1844, the Synod recognized “the privilege as well as the duty of aiding in extending the kingdom of the Redeemer throughout the world”⁷. It realized it was too young, however, to carry out mission work of its own, so instead recommended that financial support be given to the foreign mission work of its parent, the Free Church of Scotland.

⁶ T.G.M. Bryan, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Knox College Graduates*, (Toronto: The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1985): 18, 29, 135.

⁷ Synod minutes, October 1844, Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada records, PCA.

Of the various mission efforts of the Free Church of Scotland, the one that seems to have captured the hearts of most Canadian Presbyterians was its work in India, and especially the efforts of the renowned missionary, Dr. Alexander Duff. In 1853, Duff was invited to Canada in order to speak to gathered groups about his missionary work, not just to inform but to “awaken a greater degree of evangelical zeal throughout the church”⁸. He accepted, and his missionary tour did indeed awaken the zeal of the wider membership. Just over a month after his visit, the “Free Church” of Canada formed its own Foreign Mission Committee. Rather than simply supporting the parent church’s efforts, the young (perhaps adolescent) Canadian Church, was going to embark on foreign mission work of its own. In this, however, it would struggle.

Likely as a result of Duff’s influence the FMC chose India as its field of choice, and after a year of challenges found a Scottish minister, the Rev. George Stevenson, who was willing to go. Stevenson arrived in Calcutta on February 1st, 1857 and to him goes the credit of being the first foreign missionary sent out by the “Free Church” in Canada.⁹

Sadly, his mission was short-lived, and this first attempt by the Canadian Church at foreign mission work ended in some embarrassment. Stevenson opened a mission school roughly 120 miles from Calcutta, but cholera swept through the area and his school was closed. Shortly thereafter the Sepoy Rebellion broke out and the country became unsafe. Stevenson returned to Calcutta, but after a short stay decided “it was improper to expend missionary funds when unable to do missionary duty”¹⁰ and was back in Scotland by early 1858. Although the FMC indicated surprise at Stevenson’s decision, it was probably a blessing in disguise - givings to the foreign

⁸ Presbytery of London minutes, 12 May 1853, Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada records, PCA.

⁹ George Stevenson letter, May 1857, *Ecclesiastical and Missionary Record of the Presbyterian Church of Canada*, Vol. 8, No. 7 (May 1857), PCA: 107.

¹⁰ Synod Minutes - Report of Foreign Missions Committee, 1858, Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada records, PCA: 34.

mission fund in 1857 were less than hoped. Once a foreign mission effort was announced, it was assumed there would be “an increased liberality on the part of the people”, but that didn’t happen. Only £620 was raised which was just slightly more than the previous year.¹¹ Although it said it had the funds, it really didn’t. This is notable because this lack of “liberality” on the part of the wider church would continue through the years when Nisbet was conducting his mission, and would be one of the reasons why the FMC held back its support.

When the India mission failed, a deflated FMC debated what it should do next. They looked at three possibilities: the first was to follow up on requests they had received over the previous two years from the Presbytery of Toronto to form a mission to the First Nations people near the Red River; the second was to establish mission efforts on Vancouver Island, which was just opening up to settlement; and the third, was another overseas venture, this time to what they called “the Danubian Principalities” of Europe. This third option was almost certainly put in simply for appearance sake. Although a mission to First Nations people was the only one of the three that had been previously raised in any detail, the FMC and Synod instead chose Vancouver Island. This is significant for two reasons: 1. it shows a certain lack of interest, or at best a hesitancy, on the part of the Synod in conducting a mission to aboriginal people; and 2. the decision to go to British Columbia would prove to be a costly one, taking up a large portion of the Foreign Mission Committee’s budget in the years ahead. Both of these factors would in turn have an adverse impact on the level of support offered to James Nisbet and his mission.

And so, we come to 1861. It was a momentous year in the life of most Presbyterians in the Provinces of Canada East and Canada West. The “Free Church” in Canada, which Nisbet was part of, merged with the smaller United Presbyterian Church to form a new body under the

¹¹ Synod Minutes - Report on Statistics, 1857, Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada records, PCA: 48.

name the “Canada Presbyterian Church”. At the inaugural Synod of the new Church, the grassroots nature of decision-making within a Presbyterian form of government shone through. Although the Free Church had agreed in 1859 to start mission work in British Columbia, this never actually happened as no ministers could be found willing to go. In 1861, therefore, the new church had a clean slate. Rev. Robert F. Burns, who had been convener of the Free Church’s FMC and would soon hold the same office in the new church, made a motion calling on the Church to once again select British Columbia and Vancouver Island as its field of choice.¹²

After much deliberation, several amendments, and special devotions on the topic, the Synod finally agreed that yes, a missionary should be sent to British Columbia, but in addition, it was decided that one should also be sent to the Red River Settlement to assist the Rev. John Black and to start a mission to First Nations people in the area¹³. As noted, James Nisbet was approached by the FMC and after much consideration, accepted the job.

The Red River Years 1861-1866

After several months of preparations, he left for the Red River on June 24th, 1862 arriving via Minnesota, on July 19th, 25 days later¹⁴. The length of time highlights how difficult it was to reach the Red River from central Canada at that time. The fact that Nisbet’s eventual mission at Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, was a further 900km journey away still, helps place in context just how isolated his future mission would be.

At first, however, Nisbet’s work was at the Red River. Although he was appointed to the dual role of assisting John Black and establishing a mission to aboriginal people it quickly

¹² Synod Minutes, 1861, Canada Presbyterian Church records, PCA: 40.

¹³ Synod Minutes, 1861, Canada Presbyterian Church records, PCA: 46.

¹⁴ James Nisbet to Robert F. Burns, 19 July 1862, *Home and Foreign Record of the Canada Presbyterian Church*, Vol. 1, No. 11 (Sept. 1862), PCA: 289.

became apparent that this was not possible. For one, the settlement was by this time large enough to fill the time of both Black and Nisbet, and two, the First Nations people in the local neighborhood were in fact already being served by the Anglican Church. Great distances, therefore, would have to be travelled if a mission to other First Nations people were to be started, and that would require someone wholly dedicated to the cause.

As a result, Nisbet, with Black's assistance, set to work on gathering information and developing plans for a dedicated missionary. Due to a lack of funds it would be three years before the Synod finally approved the idea. By this time, Nisbet was newly married and well-enconced in his Red River work and there was no expectation that he himself would be the one chosen for the mission.

The FMC advertised the position widely and raised it with the students at Knox College. Unfortunately, months passed and no one came forward. Not wanting the work to fall by the wayside, James Nisbet himself agreed to go. As noted by John Black 'it says little for the state of the church...that none of the younger men could be found willing and qualified for the work.'¹⁵This is significant for three reasons: 1. it highlights Nisbet's personal sense of devotion and dedication to go where needed, rather than to go where he wanted; 2. it highlights the difficulty that the FMC had in finding ministers or students willing to serve in a foreign field; and 3. it set in motion a form of mission that would in essence be different from the one the FMC and the larger Synod expected, and which would in time lead some to be critical of it.

The FMC, Nisbet and Black all agreed that the mission should be largely of an "itinerant and experimental kind" whereby the missionary would have a base of operations from which he would then travel the plains visiting with the First Nations people as they migrated from camp to

¹⁵ John Black to Robert F. Burns, 25 July 1865, John Black Papers, PCA.

camp¹⁶. To this end, they also agreed that a young, unmarried minister would be most suitable. Nisbet on the other hand was into his 40s, married, and in fact was about to become a new father. By no means was he unqualified for the work, nor did he lack the drive, but in appointing him to the task the FMC should have recognized that the style of mission they were looking for may either need to be adjusted, or that a second missionary would need to be sent to assist Nisbet as soon as possible. Sadly, they would do neither, much to the frustration of Nisbet. It must be said that Nisbet himself complicated matters by giving assurances early on to the FMC that the original plan of an itinerant mission could still be achieved. The reality of the situation over the years, however, would constantly force Nisbet away from that goal, and for that he would be criticised.

It is also significant that in addition to sending a missionary to the First Nations people, the FMC was at this time also asking the Synod to send a missionary overseas to assist Rev. John Geddie of the Presbyterian Church of Nova Scotia in his work in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). A subcommittee of Synod was formed to deliberate on the issue, and this committee decided that indeed both missions should be undertaken, but that instead of just one missionary for the First Nations people, they actually recommended two. The additional cost this would require, however, caused some discussion. An amendment was made by Rev. John McTavish that kept the two missionaries for the First Nations mission, and instead replaced the suggested missionary to the New Hebrides with a simple (and less costly) financial contribution¹⁷. A second amendment was made, however, which kept the missionary for the New Hebrides, and

¹⁶ James Nisbet to Robert F. Burns, 20 February 1866, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

¹⁷ McTavish was also the minister that first raised the idea of a mission to aboriginal people. He did so at a meeting of the Presbytery of Toronto in March 1856. The Presbytery then brought it before the Synod which approved the idea in principle but asked for more information. The Presbytery decided to send McTavish out to the Red River to investigate and consult with Rev. John Black on the matter. He was unable to go that first year, however, but did go the following year and the results were presented to the Synod.

reduced the First Nations mission to just one missionary and an interpreter, which in truth would have been needed anyway. Although ten ministers formally recorded their dissent, this second motion ended up carrying the day¹⁸. This too is significant in that it highlights the fact that Nisbet's mission did have support within the wider church, but it was often a minority position and not enough to sway the agenda.

It is also interesting to note that the mover of the winning motion, which effectively removed a helpmate for Nisbet, was the Rev. William MacLaren, future convener of the FMC. MacLaren's obvious preference for "overseas" missions would become a source of frustration to Nisbet in the years to come. It is also interesting to note that, like the effort to go to India in 1857, this second attempt to send a missionary overseas failed as well. No minister was found willing to go and so the plan died. As John Black noted to Burns, "your attempted missions to India and the South Seas seem failures while those to the West and Northwest are successful. Does not providence say plainly to our church Here is your corner of the field – go in and occupy it with all your might?"¹⁹ Sadly, with MacLaren at the head of the FMC, the preference for overseas work would only magnify.

Through late 1865 and early 1866 Nisbet prepared for the mission, pulling together the resources and people needed. George Flett, brother-in-law to Mrs. Black, was hired as interpreter. He worked as a trader for the Hudsons Bay Company (HBC) but agreed to leave their employment to join the mission. John Mckay, brother-in-law of Mrs. Nisbet, was also fluent in the Cree language and was hired to manage the building and farming operations of the mission. Two additional men, Alex Polson and William McBeath, were also hired for one year to help

¹⁸ Synod Minutes, 1865, Canada Presbyterian Church records, PCA: 272, 289, 295

¹⁹ John Black to Robert F. Burns, 9 October 1866, John Black Papers, PCA.

construct the mission buildings and establish the mission farm. According to John Black, Nisbet had “secured four of the best men that the country affords”²⁰.

The Prince Albert Years 1866-1874

Nisbet and his party left the Red River Settlement on June 6th, 1866. They arrived at Fort Carlton, an HBC trading post on the North Saskatchewan River, on July 17th (41 days later)²¹. George Flett, who had been scouting the area met them at the Fort. With his assistance a location for the mission was identified (at what is today Prince Albert, Saskatchewan) and the goodwill of the local Cree, in allowing them to settle in their territory, was received. The first Sunday Nisbet held a service at which a number of people attended. Gifts of food were exchanged and Nisbet provided some basic medical assistance²².

In a letter to his sister dated November 29, 1866, Nisbet talks about the mission’s beginnings. He comments at length on the manual work of building and establishing the physical presence of the mission. With the carpentry training he received from his father, Nisbet was skilled in this work and his joy and pride in it are evident. He also began holding two services each Sunday, both requiring translation into Cree, and established a school which began with 13 pupils, including 5 First Nations children.²³

In this early letter to his sister, Nisbet also details the difficulties of being in such an isolated spot. In November Mrs. Mckay had a baby daughter. He noted that both mother and child were doing well, but his own wife Mary had worked herself too hard and taken ill. As he

²⁰ John Black to James Black, 16 April 1866, Black Papers, United Church of Canada Manitoba and North-West Conference Archives.

²¹ James Nisbet to Robert F. Burns, 18 June 1866, *Home and Foreign Record of the Canada Presbyterian Church*, Vol. 6, No. 1, PCA: 12.

²² James Nisbet to his sister, 29 November 1866, Nisbet Papers (microfilm collection), PCA.

²³ James Nisbet to Sabbath School Children, 18 January 1867, *Home and Foreign Record of the Canada Presbyterian Church*, PCA: 229.

said, “it is no pleasant thing to be 600 miles from a physician in such circumstances – but it leads us to look all the more trustingly to the ‘Great Physician’”²⁴

During 1867 the work of establishing the mission continued. In terms of the physical work, the farm was begun and construction of the main mission house was started. Nisbet continued holding two services each Sunday at the mission and occasional services at Fort Carleton. Interest in the school grew as well, especially among the HBC officers in the region; so much so that some were willing to pay for their children to board at the mission in order to attend. With the number of paid boarders sufficient to cover a salary, a teacher was secured from the Red River Settlement. Adam McBeath, Mrs. Nisbet’s older brother, was hired and arrived at the mission in mid-summer.²⁵

Nisbet’s interactions with the First Nations people, tentative at first, were also showing promise. Those that were sick or needed medical attention, as well as families that were struggling to provide for their children, arrived at the mission throughout the Winter and Spring; a number of these expressed interest in leaving their children at the mission to be schooled. For Nisbet, these were positive signs about how the mission should progress. As he noted to his sister “There seems to be a door opening before us we had little thought and it will be sad indeed if we are not allowed to take advantage of it”²⁶

Although teaching First Nations children seems to have been part of the mission plan from the start, taking in and boarding First Nations children was slightly different. Throughout 1867 Nisbet sent letters to the FMC asking for guidance on the idea, but never heard back. In

²⁴ James Nisbet to his sister, 29 November 1866, Nisbet Papers (microfilm collection), PCA.

²⁵ James Nisbet to Reid, 18 July 1867, Nisbet papers, PCA.

²⁶ James Nisbet to his sister, 17 September 1867, Nisbet Papers (microfilm collection), PCA.

fact, by October 1867 – 17 months after he had left the Red River Settlement- he had received just one official letter from the FMC.²⁷ Why such silence?

The convener, Robert F. Burns, had accepted a call to the Presbyterian Church in Chicago in early 1867 and it seems likely that his mind was on other matters. His lack of correspondence with Nisbet, therefore, can at least be understood if not justified. However, in June 1867, William MacLaren, who had been a regular member of the committee and therefore up to speed on its activities, was appointed convener. It is less easy to understand why a new convener, both from an administrative as well as pastoral point of view, wouldn't have been in immediate touch with one of his charges.

Nor was it simply encouragement that Nisbet was in need of. The issue of whether he should take in and board First Nations children - essentially the starting of a residential school - was no small matter. On top of this, he was also dealing with a significant personnel issue in the resignation of George Flett, his interpreter, and one of the key members of his mission staff.

In spite of this lack of communication and guidance, Nisbet soldiered on. His letters at this time are in fact quite positive. The mission buildings and farm were progressing well, attendance at both the school and the Sabbath services was good, and his interactions with the First Nations people visiting the mission were both friendly and positive.

With progress being made, Nisbet was hopeful that a second missionary would soon be sent. In almost every letter he wrote to the FMC he noted the value and benefit this would provide. With a second minister, one of them could remain at the mission while the other travelled the plains, doing the itinerating work that the FMC so wanted. It was entirely logical and it was not just Nisbet that pushed the idea but John Black as well.

²⁷ James Nisbet to Reid, 1 October 1867, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

In his first report as convener, however, MacLaren, doesn't even mention it. In his second report, in 1869, he does. Unfortunately, of the four recommendations he placed before the Synod none involved help for Nisbet. Why? The FMC was once again looking overseas. Since the failed attempts to go to India in 1857 and the New Hebrides in 1866, the desire had not gone away. The FMC was, at this time, actually involved in three different mission fields: British Columbia, the Red River Settlement, and Nisbet's. The mission in B.C. had expanded to two missionaries in 1864, while the Red River mission, begun with Nisbet's arrival in 1861, had now grown to two as well. Nisbet, on the other hand, was still alone. All three fields, however, were in need of further assistance, the work far exceeding the capacity of the few missionaries in each location. At the same time, givings to the FMC were a concern. Although they were increasing, the expenses were routinely greater than the revenues. Yet still the FMC was hoping to go overseas.

In order to do this, the FMC was hoping the Synod would transfer responsibility for both the B.C. and Red River fields to the Home Mission Committee (HMC), the argument being that although both were remote, the work was to a largely Christian population, and therefore not really 'foreign' in nature. This, in turn, would free up revenue. Both Nisbet and Black, however, were concerned. In a letter to MacLaren, Black noted that:

“the native tribes whose country we occupy have the first claim upon us and until that claim is to some adequate degree met we should not be doing our duty to cast our eyes and our offerings far away on tribes and natives with which we have little more connection than that they are of the human race... You say you are satisfied that we will not do less for the Red Indians for having a missionary in China or India – it may be so but the question is are you not doing far too little for the Red Indians now?”²⁸

²⁸ John Black to William MacLaren, 1 November 1870, John Black Papers, PCA.

In the end, the Synod approved the idea of transferring the British Columbia and Red River work, but moved cautiously, asking the FMC and HMC to work out the details between them. As to how the eventual savings would be used, the Synod again hesitated, and left it in the hands of the FMC. During the following year, however, the FMC and HMC were unable to come to an agreement and so expenses were once again higher than the givings. As a result neither MacLaren's overseas mission nor a second missionary for Nisbet, were in fact possible.

In addition to a request for a second missionary, there was a personal item which Nisbet wished at this time to hear from the FMC about. His brother Henry, the missionary in Polynesia, was going to be visiting Oakville in 1868 and Nisbet wanted to be there. Given the locations of their respective missions it was a rare, if not unique, opportunity. To the credit of the FMC the request was granted and Nisbet and his family made the 3000km journey from Prince Albert to Oakville in the Spring of 1868. From a pastoral perspective, it was a wonderful gesture; from an operational perspective, however, there were difficulties at the mission which might not have happened if Nisbet, as leader, had been there.

For one, the Nisbet's servant, a young widowed woman who remained at the mission, became pregnant. This was kept secret from the Nisbet's until later on, and was a cause for grief and pain to both Nisbet and his wife. In addition to this, however, relations with some of the First Nations people around the mission became strained. When Nisbet, and his family, returned in late September and heard of these developments, he was concerned about how it would affect the relationships he had been building with the local First Nations people. A few days later, they actually called for a meeting, which is recounted in some detail by Nisbet:

“Today, the general counsel (or what shall I call it?) was held. The Indians (men) came in force about noon and as that is our dinner time business was commenced by giving dinner to all who came – pemmican, potatoes, bread, butter and tea...Dinner discussed and the

pipe of peace lighted I said to them that I had been told that there were some among them who wished to speak to us about some things connected to the mission... For five long hours we were listening to Indian speeches of more or less merit... I made a general reply to all that was said. ... I trust and pray that good will come of this conference – some predicted trouble, but I do not apprehend any. I found a great deal more of the conciliatory spirit than I expected, and more appreciation of our work than I thought existed, and thank God for it.”²⁹

Nisbet hoped and prayed that good would come from the counsel, and to some degree it did. The next two years saw a number of positive developments in the work of the mission. The winter of 1868/69 was a difficult one for the local First Nations people, with little snow and poor hunting. The mission’s farm, therefore, proved to be especially valuable as Nisbet noted in a letter to MacLaren of March 23, 1869 “it is no uncommon thing from ten to fifteen (sometimes as many as twenty) Indians to eat in our kitchen daily”³⁰ and again on April 29, “we have done a great deal towards keeping the Indians from starvation by the produce of our fields”³¹. Nor was it just the First Nations that suffered. The scarcity caused by the winter was a hardship for the local settlers and HBC families as well. Nisbet supplied food to some and in a move to reduce the mission expenses sold it to those that could pay. He noted to the FMC that if payment wasn’t possible, by either the settlers or the First Nations, then he would - if possible - have them do some work around the mission in return. One criticism that would in time be levelled at the mission was that it was more of a trading post than a mission, and one can see how situations such as this, could lead to that conclusion.

Nisbet was also pleased with the attendance at the Sabbath services, and had also baptized a number of individuals over the course of the summer. In a very early letter to the FMC Nisbet asked for guidance on the issue of baptism. He recognized that he himself was strict

²⁹ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 29 September 1868, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

³⁰ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 23 March 1869, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

³¹ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 29 April 1869, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

in his expectations of both religious knowledge and demonstrated commitment and wondered if he (like other missionaries he saw) should be more relaxed.³² He never received a reply on the issue, and so continued in his own way. There are many instances throughout his letters where baptism is in fact requested but Nisbet declines.

In hindsight, this strictness would be detrimental to his cause. In early 1870, MacLaren sent a letter to Nisbet which was obviously critical of the small number of conversions at the mission. It was a frustrating letter for Nisbet, and this frustration shows through in his reply:

“You say that ‘When greater spiritual results have been achieved the church will no doubt be prepared to go forward if necessary to new expenditure... Surely the church does not expect results without using the means to obtain them! and I cannot allow myself to believe that the measure of liberality on the part of the church will be regulated by the amount of spiritual results at any given time. I always thought that it was a maxim with Christians ‘Duty is ours, results are God’s’³³

It is an extraordinary quote that sheds light on just how MacLaren, the FMC, and indeed the majority in the wider Church, viewed success in a mission. The mission was only into its third year, but already some positive achievements had been made: they had secured the goodwill of the First Nations people in the area (a feat that Nisbet would later comment was not an easy thing to do, even for George Flett³⁴); they had constructed a number of buildings to support the mission’s operations; they had established a school and had begun farming on a scale sufficient enough to help support the mission staff as well as to act charitably towards the First Nations people; they had begun assisting interested First Nations families in plowing and seeding plots of land for themselves and provided a secure place for them to store their provisions through the winter; Nisbet also provided two services each Sabbath, one in English one in Cree, and he

³² James Nisbet to Robert F. Burns, 3 June 1867, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

³³ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 5 March 1870, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

³⁴ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 6 July 1869, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

walked 40 miles to Fort Carleton each month in order to hold services for the HBC employees and others settled in the vicinity. For MacLaren and the FMC, however, these achievements were of less concern. What they wanted were results.

Sadly, MacLaren wasn't the only one that was critical. As isolated as the mission was, it wasn't immune to gossip and hearsay. HBC men, gold prospectors, free traders and others would pass through the mission and, as one can imagine, then spread news coloured by their own perspectives. Nisbet also hired occasional workers from the Red River Settlement to assist at times in construction and farm work, some of whom he would fire, and these would then return home with their own biases. Nor should one be naïve. In the face of many challenges the mission was showing positive achievements, but that does not mean that it, and everyone attached to it, was perfect.

John Black being in the Red River Settlement was intermediary between Nisbet and the FMC; all letters going through him. He and Nisbet had a solid relationship, but in reality he never visited the mission, and throughout 1869 and most of 1870, he seems to have been swayed by the impressions and rumours that he heard swirling around the community. His letters to MacLaren, therefore, are tainted with them as well.

Generally speaking, there were three "unfavourable impressions" floating around which Black shared with MacLaren: the first was that the mission was a sort of 'family compact' - Nisbet had hired only his relations; the second was that the mission expenses were too high; and the third was that too much time was being spent on building and farming and not enough on mission work - that more itinerating needed to be done. By the end of 1869 Nisbet became worried that it wasn't just a portion of the Red River settlers that viewed the mission unfavourably but also people in Canada. As a result, he decided to write a lengthy article

detailing the work of the mission which he asked to be printed in the Church's monthly periodical. The article was called "Three and a Half Years of an Indian Mission".

On the complaint that the mission was a family compact, Nisbet himself never really commented. John McKay, his Cree interpreter, and Adam McBeath, the school teacher and later farm manager, were indeed his brothers-in-law. As for McKay, John Black once told MacLaren 'I do not know of another man in all of Rupert's land that could fill his place.'³⁵ McKay was fluent in Cree but was also deeply religious and assisted Nisbet greatly in the mission work, and would go on to have a successful missionary career in his own right. In truth, he was essential. McBeath on the other hand had originally been brought out to the mission to teach the English school for the children of the local HBC officers, his salary being paid not by the FMC but by the parents. When the school closed for lack of students, Nisbet hired him on as manager of the farm and to help with construction of the mission buildings. John McKay in fact, had originally been hired in this capacity but when George Flett resigned as interpreter, McKay took over that role, and McBeath was given the general manager position. It is easy, therefore to see, where the perception of a family compact could start.

Although Nisbet's support of McBeath never wavered, others do seem to have had issues with him. One was Lawrence Clarke, the chief HBC trader at Carleton House, and relations between him and the mission soured in 1868 and 1869. Nisbet, however, reveals the likely heart of the matter in a letter to MacLaren, noting:

"I believe Mr. Clarke's opposition to the mission and his efforts to injure it came out distinctly in a conversation I had with an old Indian lately who asked me if the master at Carleton had ever told me or wrote to me that I was harbouring the Indians – supplying them with provisions and keeping them from hunting... I counselled peace and told the old man that both he and his friends know that I have never induced them to keep from hunting; that they have all got meals at the mission when they came hungry to us, and they

³⁵ John Black to William MacLaren, 1 November 1870, John Black Papers, PCA.

have got provisions for their families when they were starving, but I have never done anything, nor do I wish to do anything to keep them from hunting. My humble belief is that Mr. C. is annoyed that we are not contented to proceed on the do nothing principle at this mission, but are determined to initiate such a movement as may tend ultimately to induce the Indians to become settlers and in his shortsightedness he imagines that that will injure the fur trade.³⁶

Clarke was, in fact, disliked by many and would go on to be a flashpoint in relations with the Metis.³⁷ It is also interesting to note that in 1868 and again in early 1869, the very time when Clarke began criticising the mission, was the very time when McBeath in particular was assisting some of the First Nations families around the mission with plowing and sowing fields of their own.

John Black too, had doubts in late 1868 as to the importance of McBeath to the work, but would go on to change his mind noting that “from all accounts he has proved a most efficient farmer and general manager”. He also noted McBeath’s own frustration with the criticisms saying “In addition to an almost constant pain in the chest which has troubled him for more than a year he and all of them are discouraged and hurt by the manner in which they have been treated and spoken of here and in Canada”.³⁸

Regarding the second charge - that the mission’s expenses were too high - Nisbet was aware that he was likely spending more than the Synod wanted, but until 1870 he was conducting the mission in a financial vacuum. Early on he had asked the FMC what the expenditure should be but never received an answer. Now he was being criticised for spending too much and one can imagine how frustrating this must have been. Although the salary costs alone for the three staff – Nisbet, McKay and McBeath – totaled \$1850, the FMC capped the

³⁶ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 21 April 1869, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

³⁷ Stanley Gordon, “Lawrence Clarke,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol XI (1881-1890), http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/clarke_lawrence_11E.html (accessed September 3, 2015).

³⁸ John Black to William MacLaren, 1 November 1870, John Black Papers, PCA.

mission expenses at just \$2400 a year³⁹. In truth, the average expenditure on the mission by the FMC during the first two years was just \$2504⁴⁰, hardly an overwhelming amount for a mission that had to start from scratch, and very much in line with the FMC's yearly expenditure on the mission in British Columbia. Why all of a sudden did the FMC get so concerned? In 1869 the expenditure ballooned to \$4321. Nisbet had originally purchased supplies for the mission through John Black, who in turn imported goods from England (this being cheaper than ordering from Canada). In an attempt to save money he switched to ordering supplies on account through the HBC. However, the supplies turned out to be much more expensive than expected and so he decided to switch back to ordering through John Black. This meant he had to close out the account and pay the balance in full, requiring an upfront payment larger than normal⁴¹. The mission expenses would drop down to just over \$3000 for the next few years; over the new budget, but more in line with the B.C. mission. To a FMC that was desperate to embark on an overseas mission to China or India, however, anything above \$2400 seems to have been too much.

One way that Nisbet tried to reduce expenditure was to conduct a lot of the building and construction work around the mission himself. His training in carpentry served him well in this respect. Unfortunately it also led to the charge that he was doing too much 'manual' labor at the expense of 'missionary' labour. To this Nisbet retorted 'it is not manual but Missionary labour that is expected of me. I know that; and if anyone can truthfully say that I am neglecting missionary labor for the sake of manual labor I shall freely confess that I am guilty of a grievous

³⁹ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 14 December 1870, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

⁴⁰ Synod Minutes, 1867, 1868, Canada Presbyterian Church records, PCA. Note: expenses were recorded as \$2234 (for the year ending April 1867, page lxxv, Minutes for 1867) and \$2774 (for the year ending April 1868; page lxxviii, Minutes for 1868).

⁴¹ John Black to William MacLaren, 12 November 1868, John Black Papers, PCA.

error: that is not the case⁴². To the FMC, it seems that missionary labour in turn meant itinerancy – travelling the plains and meeting with the First Nations people in their tents. Certainly it was an important means, and Nisbet himself notes many times that if a second missionary were sent, this aspect would be enhanced. From Nisbet's letters, however, one can see that the First Nations people themselves, from a very early date, began visiting the mission regularly thus allowing considerable interaction to take place even without the itinerating, a fact that the FMC never seems to have understood.

Along with this, the FMC never seemed to recognize the domestic nature of the mission. From 3000km away the ideal was a small base of operations from which the itinerating would be done. If, in 1866 they had sent an unmarried man, with an unmarried interpreter, out into the field, this might have been a possibility. In Nisbet and McKay, however, they had two men with wives and growing numbers of children – the Nisbet's would have four and the McKay's five. In addition to their own children, the mission had taken in a number of First Nations children – a total of fourteen different children over the years from 1866 to 1869. At the end of 1869, the mission in fact consisted of 28 people, not including the varying numbers of First Nations people living nearby in tents. It was in truth a bustling centre of operations, which in turn needed proper facilities. Nisbet recognized this even if the FMC did not. Knowing that expenses were an issue, he therefore did as much of the manual work as he could. Rather than being praised, he was unfortunately, criticised.

Were there things that Nisbet could or should have done differently? Almost certainly, but it is only with hindsight that these become clearer. At the same time, Nisbet regularly requested feedback and guidance from the FMC but often never received the information he was

⁴² James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 7 January 1870, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

seeking, and so continued on his own. To then receive criticism for the way he managed the mission must have been a great frustration to him. With hindsight, the criticism itself also becomes somewhat clearer as well. Nisbet's mission farm, which seems to have been the focal point for a lot of the criticism, began producing large and successful harvests almost immediately, which Nisbet was not shy to announce. At the same time the Red River began experiencing both drought and grasshopper plagues. Nisbet was also receiving financial assistance from the FMC that allowed him to purchase farm equipment, supplies and provisions, items that the people in the Red River, almost as remote as Nisbet's mission, would have to pay for themselves. It is not hard, therefore, to see how jealousy, especially amongst families not connected to the mission, could arise.

By the end of 1870, roughly two years after the unfavourable impressions first began to surface, John Black had a significant change of opinion. He began to see the complaints largely for what they were – the jealousies of some - and he comes clean with MacLaren in a letter saying:

“I for my part am exceeding sorry that influenced by the views of parties here [the Red River] and there [in Canada] and not always fully informed as to facts, tho' my confidence in the mission remained unshaken, I have sometimes written in such a way as to have given [Mr. Nisbet] pain. The most brotherly feeling however has never ceased to exist between Mr. N. and myself.”⁴³

He goes on to castigate MacLaren, saying:

“there has on the one hand been a constant cry of expense and of a ‘family compact’ and of little work done and what not and on the other hand they have been left without encouragement or even notice by your committee for some nine or ten months – and for men laboring hard as they were unquestionably doing and isolated and lonely you need not wonder if they should lose heart. Even good and patient Mr. Nisbet is giving way and the whole thing has been within a hair's breadth of being broken up...as for yourself so far as I have seen or heard Mr. N has no reason to complain of unkind treatment positively – your sins have rather been those of Omission than of Commission... now let us all amend

⁴³ John Black to William MacLaren, 1 November 1870, John Black Papers, PCA.

these things and miss no opportunity to cheer the hearts and encourage the hands of those who are jeopardizing their lives within high places of the field.’⁴⁴

The lack of letters from Maclaren, and the lack of definitive information within the letters that did arrive, was perhaps the greatest frustration for Nisbet. Sadly, even with Black’s cry for change, the pattern would continue, and indeed, get worse in the years to come.

In addition to facing the jealousies of some, and a lack of encouragement from the committee, the year 1870 would be a challenging year in other respects as well. Both Mrs. Mckay and Mrs. McBeath became increasingly sick and had to return to the Red River; Mrs. Mckay being serious enough that John Mckay was unsure if he could continue with the mission. Nisbet sympathised but was worried about how he could possibly proceed without his interpreter. By September, Adam McBeath too was ailing and was forced to leave, which meant that Nisbet and his wife, Mary, who had just given birth to a baby boy in June, were left to carry on the work of the mission alone.

As challenging as the year 1870 had been for the Nisbets, it was unfortunately a much more difficult year for the First Nations people - a smallpox epidemic swept across the plains, killing hundreds. Sometime in 1869, however, Nisbet had secured one or two scabs and at the first sign of the disease used them to vaccinate over 150 aboriginal people around the mission, and then several hundred more around Fort Carleton.⁴⁵ John Black would report to MacLaren late in 1870 that of the 500 or so vaccinated not one seemed to have caught the infection. It was to Black, ‘one of the best proofs of the utility of vaccinations that I have ever heard of.’⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ James Nisbet to the editor, 19 January 1871, *Home and Foreign Record of the Canada Presbyterian Church*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (April 1871), PCA.

⁴⁶ John Black to William MacLaren, 1 November 1870, John Black Papers, PCA.

In addition to the fear of smallpox, the First Nations people around the mission were also extremely worried about their future. In a letter dated September 15, 1869, Nisbet wrote about the fear they had over the impending transfer of the vast HBC territory to the Canadian Government, saying:

“For a month past we have had sixteen tents of Indians beside us (over 100 persons). On the 30th of August they asked to have a talk with me about the opening up of the country that they have been hearing so much about of late. They greatly fear the coming of *foreigners* to drive them out of their country... I told them all that I knew about the transfer of the territory to the care of the Canadian Government, and I said that in my letters to people in Canada I had frequently said that if *that* Government should get the charge of the territory I hope the interests of the Indians will be attended to”.⁴⁷

As a result of this fear and uncertainty, as well as the smallpox epidemic, fewer First Nations people visited the mission during the winter. However, the ones that did arrive were in terrible need. One man whose wife had died asked the Nisbet’s to take in his two children, while another family who was as Nisbet says ‘in extreme want of provisions’⁴⁸ asked him to take their 11 year old boy. Nisbet hesitated. With both the Mckays and the McBeaths away, the Nisbets were alone at the mission, but also desperately low on provisions themselves. No shipment of packages had arrived from Canada during the year, which left them very low on supplies. Nevertheless, he could not refuse to help. “To clothe the destitute around us” he noted to MacLaren, “we have been obliged to strip our own wardrobe and that of our children as bare as possible, some of the children attending school are literally in rags.”⁴⁹ The Nisbet’s took in six children during the early spring of 1871, unfortunately this extra work put too much strain on Nisbet’s wife Mary and her health suffered for it.

⁴⁷ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 15 September 1869, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

⁴⁸ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 14 April 1871, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

⁴⁹ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 14 December 1870, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

It was at this very time that Nisbet received word that the FMC was once again pushing for a new overseas mission. Nisbet quickly understood the ramifications. In a letter to MacLaren, he noted:

“From the last number of the Record that I received I observed in the proceedings of some of the presbyteries that a proposal for a mission to China or India is being considered. Of course no one could object to the establishment of such a mission if the funds admit of it; and for one I would rejoice to see such a mission in successful operation. But I would remind the Committee and the Church that when I undertook to organize this mission I fully expected that a second missionary would immediately follow.”⁵⁰

A young student named George Leslie Mackay had offered his services to the FMC. At the same time, an agreement had been reached and the work in the Red River Settlement was removed from the FMC’s plate, thus giving them a slight budget surplus. With some money, and a willing body, the Committee sent a circular out to Presbyteries asking two questions: should they accept Mackay’s offer and send him to a foreign field, and if so, to what field. It is interesting to note that both Nisbet and Black suggested he be sent to Nisbet’s mission. Unfortunately for Nisbet, not one of the presbyteries that responded shared this view; all suggested a new overseas field. The Church duly approved and George Leslie Mackay left for Taiwan in October 1871. However, Nisbet’s mission wasn’t totally forgotten. In its final recommendation the FMC did ask for authorization to seek out a second missionary for it and the Church approved.

With the resources available, and a willing candidate, however, help could have been sent to Nisbet immediately, but instead the FMC and the wider church elected to first go overseas. In his report to the General Assembly, MacLaren sums up this preference very clearly, saying:

⁵⁰ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 18 March 1871, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

“It has been felt that while all are deeply interested in Missionary effort among the Aborigines, some are by their sympathies and judgement more attracted towards evangelistic work among the great permanent races, such as inhabit India or China.”⁵¹ It is an interesting and telling statement about how the FMC and the wider membership approached the idea of mission, based not necessarily on where there was need, but on where they preferred.

For his part, Nisbet showed a surprising degree of graciousness, saying to MacLaren, “I sincerely wish Mr. Mackay and the China Mission every success. There is no need for antagonism in the Lord’s work, although I most decidedly say that the interests of this mission have not been considered by the church as they ought to have been.”⁵²

By the early autumn of 1871, both John Mckay (Nisbet’s interpreter) and Adam McBeath (the farm manager) and their families had returned to the mission. For over a year Nisbet had been alone, with no interpreter to assist him in the work; one can imagine how difficult and frustrating it must have been for him. With Mckay back, the work returned to normal. Sunday afternoon services in Cree were once again conducted, followed by a time of discussion. The school was reopened after the summer with 26 children in attendance, and lumber started being gathered with the hope of finally constructing a church for the mission.⁵³

On a personal note, James Nisbet had begun asking the FMC as early as 1869 if he could bring his daughters to Oakville in the year 1872, so that they could attend school. Frustratingly for Nisbet, he waited almost three years to hear if this would be allowed, finally getting approval in February 1872. On a happier note, the same letter of approval also brought word that a second

⁵¹ General Assembly Minutes – Report of the Foreign Mission Committee, 1871, Canada Presbyterian Church records, PCA: xcv.

⁵² James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 19 January 1872, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

⁵³ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 16 October 1871, Nisbet Papers, PCA. Note: the mission actually had 8 First Nations children under its responsibility, but one (Robert Burns) was studying at the school in Kildonan while another that was just 3 years old was staying with a family in the settlement.

missionary had actually been found for the mission. A young man attending Princeton theological seminary named Edward Vincent, had offered his services and the FMC had accepted.

Vincent arrived with his wife at the end of August 1872 and so Nisbet and his wife and children were able to leave on their journey to Oakville at the beginning of September. Along with Vincent, however, another minister had arrived, but not to serve as a missionary; rather he had been sent by the FMC to investigate the activities of the mission.

In February 1872 an article had appeared in the *Western Advertiser*, a London, Ontario, newspaper, that raised anew the same old accusations against the mission that had circulated in 1869, and sadly never went away⁵⁴. South-western Ontario was a Presbyterian stronghold, and to have an article like this come out in a public newspaper was likely both embarrassing and damaging. At the General Assembly in June, therefore, the Church decided to send a deputy to the mission in order to ‘encourage the missionaries in their work, enquire into the method of its operations, and make any suggestions which may be deemed advisable.’⁵⁵ In other words, get to the bottom of things.

In a letter to Maclaren of February 28, 1872, John Black comments about the article and refutes the criticisms it gives of the Mission, saying:

“I believed them, and still believe them, to have in a large measure engendered from family and personal jealousies which are the very plague of this settlement, and no doubt there have been some things in the arrangements and management of the mission which afford occasion for those who seek it. What institution is so perfect as not to afford sufficient material for envy and malice to construct a case out of? But if I am not utterly

⁵⁴ Bell, “The C.P. Mission Scandal – An Expensive and Unproductive Station”, *Western Advertiser*, 2 February 1872, University of Western Ontario Archives and Special Collections.

⁵⁵ Update on the Report of the Foreign Mission Committee to the General Assembly, *Home and Foreign Record of the Canada Presbyterian Church*, Vol. 11, No. 7 (July 1872), PCA: 207.

mistaken and out in all my views and opinions, a large part of what is said and now printed is utterly false and the rest grossly exaggerated.’⁵⁶

It is interesting, however, to note just where the article came from. The correspondent was a Mr. Bell, who had been a member of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in London, Ontario but was at the time living in the Red River Settlement and working as a carpenter at the new Presbyterian College. He wrote the article based on reports he had heard and which were in turn confirmed by an unnamed ‘reverend gentleman’ and by several former hired hands that had worked at the mission.

The reverend gentleman mentioned by Bell as a primary source was in fact, not a reverend at all, but a Mr. Goldie. He arrived at the Red River Settlement about June of 1871 with a note of introduction written by none other than Rev William MacLaren, convener of the FMC. In the note, MacLaren speaks of Goldie as a ‘friend’ and a ‘gentleman of Christian worth’ who has ‘for several years been engaged in missionary labor in different parts of Canada’.⁵⁷ Black thought him a bit peculiar, but based on what he perceived as a recommendation from MacLaren engaged Goldie for a time in conducting home mission work in various settlements around the Red River. After three months, Goldie then travelled west to the Saskatchewan valley. At the end of his time in the Red River Settlement Black paid him \$55 which he hoped the Home Mission Committee would approve.

MacLaren, in turn, took the news that Goldie had been hired badly and reproached Black for it. Black, in his reply to MacLaren, was not amused. Given the letter of introduction, he says:

“what could you expect but that we should in our sore lack of service get him into employment at once? (You) say nothing of his ‘natural peculiarities’ or ‘erratic modes of operating’ or even of his not being licensed or ordained. You left that for me to find out all

⁵⁶ John Black to William MacLaren, 28 February 1872, John Black Papers, PCA.

⁵⁷ John Black to William MacLaren, 10 October 1871, John Black Papers, PCA.

by myself... Seeing you take me to task about the matter I have taken the liberty of presenting to you a view of it from my own stand point and perhaps have played too strongly on the key which you struck. If so excuse me.⁵⁸

He goes on to say that regardless of the peculiarities, he didn't regret hiring Goldie, as he did good work while in the settlement.

Goldie arrived at Prince Albert in mid-October. Nisbet wrote of the visit to MacLaren on January 19, 1872, saying 'He came at 10pm on the 19th Oct. and left the next morning about 8 so that he saw very little either of the place or the people, but he expressed himself as highly pleased with what he did see.'⁵⁹. Goldie was therefore at the mission for just one night; hardly a reliable informant.

Sadly, the whole article was one of shoddy journalism and hearsay, and it is a sad comment that the FMC felt it necessary to send (and pay for) a representative to go all the way to Prince Albert to investigate. However, the man they did send, the Rev William Moore, was by all accounts diligent, thorough and fair - he had praise for Nisbet and the work he had been doing under very difficult conditions, and his report in the end appears to have gone some way in healing the situation.

With this behind them, the Nisbet's left their daughters in Oakville and set off for the long journey back to the mission. While they were away, Edward Vincent and his wife had continued the work. Some credit needs to be given to them for doing so with little training; nevertheless, he seems to have struggled to find his calling and a few months after the Nisbet's returned, he tendered his resignation. This has led some to believe there was tension between the two, but that is not the case. The two families were not close, but there appears to have been no serious friction between them. In essence, Vincent's heart wasn't in it. As Nisbet notes in a letter

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 19 January 1872, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

to his sister, “They have both longed for home ever since they came here”.⁶⁰ He also had a certain level of disillusionment with the work. With the Nisbet’s leaving just after he arrived, it meant they were alone for almost a year, and thus experienced the same challenges and difficulties that the Nisbets had. At the same time, Vincent had signed up to be a missionary to the First Nations people, but with the increasing numbers of English and English Metis settling in the vicinity of the mission, he found himself having to minister to a growing and diverse congregation.

Domestically, there were challenges as well. As much as Nisbet had been criticised for the amount of manual labour he was conducting at the mission, he never received approval to construct a second dwelling, which he had hoped to use as accommodation for the First Nations children living at the mission but could have also been used for a second missionary⁶¹. As a result, there was just the one mission residence which was shared by the Nisbets, their children, the Vincents, and also the new school teacher and his family. At the same time, not long after the Nisbets arrived back, Mrs. Vincent gave birth to a baby daughter. Unfortunately, the baby was sick and lived only a few days and one can imagine how such an event would call you back to family and a place of comfort⁶². Finally, Vincent also experienced the same lack of communication from the FMC that Nisbet had endured. During his year and a half at the mission, most of which was spent alone, Vincent received just two letters from MacLaren. Whether this was a factor in his wish to resign is unknown, but it certainly must have been a frustration.

In January of 1874 Nisbet wrote a letter to MacLaren in which he commented on the changing nature of the mission. With the transfer of the territory to the Canadian Government,

⁶⁰ James Nisbet to his sister, 3 March 1874, Nisbet Papers (microfilm collection), PCA.

⁶¹ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 23 March 1869, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

⁶² James Nisbet to his sister, 7 October 1873, Nisbet papers, PCA.

large numbers of English and English Metis were now arriving and settling near the mission and at various locations around it. The demands of meeting the needs of the mission as well as ministering to this growing population were proving difficult. With Vincent leaving, the whole field was once again left to Nisbet, who was both worried and beginning to lose patience with MacLaren. Not one letter had arrived from him since they had left Oakville the previous year.

By this time, he had also been unwell for several weeks. His wife too, had been suffering from sickness that would come and go but now seemed more permanent. By the beginning of May, she was no better and Nisbet became worried. At the beginning of July he finally received a letter from MacLaren, “the only letter I have had from you since I left Ont. a year ago” he noted with rising frustration. To make matters worse, the letter brought nothing - no new missionary would be sent to replace Vincent. For a man now alone and ailing and hearing nothing from the committee for almost a year, the despair in his words by this time is sadly obvious.

The FMC knew that Vincent was leaving well before the General Assembly in June of 1874, yet finding a replacement for him was not one of their recommendations. Instead, they asked the Synod to approve their selection of Dr. J.B. Fraser as second missionary to Taiwan, and to allow the committee to select and send a third missionary to Taiwan as soon as possible. In his report to the Assembly, MacLaren even states that this was made possible in part by the savings created with Vincent’s resignation. MacLaren had once said to John Black that if a mission to China or India were begun, the FMC would not do less for Nisbet and the First Nations people. Sadly, it was a commitment he and the FMC did not honor.

By early August, Nisbet was in poor shape while his wife was at the very edge. Nisbet later commented on her condition in a letter to his sister, saying

“Mary was not able to raise herself from the pillow or to stand alone when up. She was reduced to the lowest stage of emaciation, and the question just forced itself on us – are we to keep her at Prince Albert to die by inches before our eyes, or shall we risk a journey? In the one case it seemed inevitable death, on the other there was just the slightest hope of reaching a doctor”.⁶³

With John McKay as their guide and caretaker, they decided to try. They left the mission in mid-August and amazingly arrived at the Red River 22 days later on September 9th.

Unfortunately, by this time both James and Mary were in poor condition. On September 18th, John Black commented on their desperate situation. In regards to Mary, he noted “I left her bedside about an hour ago and I think it is very doubtful if ever she will rise from that bed again”. As to James, he said “his legs and feet are much swollen and black spotted with scurvy. The Dr. says his kidneys are affected. There is also something seriously wrong with the upper part of the chest but whether his lungs or the bronchial tubes I do not know. His breath is very short and yesterday morning he coughed three hours successively putting up a quantity of blood”. Black goes on to note that “Mr. N. charges me to say that he would have written at once on arriving but that in addition to his general weakness his hands are so full of sores that he could not hold his pen”. It shows an extraordinary devotion to duty to the very end on Nisbet’s part. Mary Nisbet would pass away the following day; James Nisbet would die eleven days later. They would leave 4 young children as orphans.

Conclusion

In both 1861, and again in 1865, James Nisbet accepted a role that no one else was willing to take. In his letter of acceptance he had one condition, that “the Church will bear with my infirmities, and sustain me by their prayers, and encourage me in carrying out such plans as

⁶³ Microfilm letters, letter to his sister, sept. 11, 1874 from kildonan

may, from time to time, be considered necessary for the success of the undertaking”. In this, the FMC, and more specifically, its convener William MacLaren, would fail.

For eight years James Nisbet struggled through sickness, isolation, unfair criticism and a lack of support. From the beginning he expected a second missionary would be sent to assist him. He would have to wait six long years before that would happen. Sadly, that second missionary would in turn leave and in the last year of his life, Nisbet would be truly neglected.

For its part, the FMC too struggled to achieve. It had been born out of an interest in the overseas work of the Free Church of Scotland, and in its adolescent hopes, attempted to match the parent church’s success, only to fail. It changed course and started work in the Red River Settlement, British Columbia and eventually Saskatchewan, but it was a great age of missions, and the stories of exotic work being done by other churches in Asia, were too tempting.

The mission to Taiwan, begun by the FMC in 1871 with the sending out of George Leslie Mackay, would go on to become perhaps the most successful of all the missions entered into by The Presbyterian Church in Canada. To this day, there is a strong bond between Taiwanese and Canadian Presbyterians. Would Nisbet’s mission have been as successful if he had been given greater support? Perhaps not, but would he, and the First Nations people around his mission, not have benefited from a greater generosity on the part of the FMC and the wider Church?

Nisbet once stated that “a man is not always the best judge of where he may be the most useful, although he may have a preference for some particular field”. He went on to say “For my own part I never once thought of laboring among these Indians until I saw that necessity was laid upon me.”⁶⁴ Perhaps he could have also said “a FMC” or even “a Church” is not always the best judge of where it may be the most useful, even if it has a preference. By following its preference

⁶⁴ James Nisbet to William MacLaren, 14 April 1871, Nisbet Papers, PCA.

for a new overseas mission, rather than its duty to the mission already started, it unfortunately showed a surprising lack of compassion and care for both Nisbet and the First Nations people he served. As Nisbet once said “Duty is ours; Results are Gods”.

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