

From Our History **The Treaty of Peace**

Observers of human nature will know that in a church environment it is not unusual to find people whose strong opinions set them apart from others. Sometimes polarized opinions can lead to serious rifts in the congregation. St. Matthew's faced this problem in its early years, when the church was known as Mather's Meeting House. It attracted non-Anglican parishioners from both the Nonconformist and Protestant Dissenting traditions.

Most of the Protestant Dissenters who came to Halifax had been members of either the Congregational Church in New England, or the Presbyterian Church in the American colonies, Scotland or Ireland. Mather's Meeting House, which was the church home for these folks, secured its position in the town when religious freedom for Protestants was enshrined in local legislation in 1758. However, for the next 30 years the church was served by an eclectic cast of appointed and interim pastors representing many religious traditions. Accordingly, the Congregationalists and Presbyterians in the congregation maintained the convictions of their individual denominations, rather than coalesce around a common vision.

Matters came to a head in 1787 when the pulpit was left vacant by the unexpected resignation of Rev. Thomas Russell. While there were many contentious issues between the two factions in the congregation, they shared two overwhelming desires: to retain a permanent minister who would provide an anchor for the young congregation, and to not have to join the Church of England in order to achieve this stability. With this motivation, a select committee from the congregation sat down and prepared a constitution for St. Matthew's. These Rules and Resolutions for the Governance of the Congregation were later nicknamed the "Treaty of Peace" by church historians.

There were 20 rules relating to membership, management, finances and church governance. Compromise provisions preserved the Congregationalists' power to call and remove ministers internally, even though the Presbyterians believed that this was the responsibility of a higher church authority known as Presbytery. The Presbyterians were appeased by another rule that allowed continued use of the Psalms of David, while the Congregationalists were allowed to use Watt's Psalms during services. There was also a provision that all loose monies collected in the church were to go to the poor once the sexton's salary was paid.

To be a voting member of St. Matthew's, one had to sign the Rules. This requirement continued into the early 19th century, and between 1787 and 1825 two hundred and sixteen men from the lower, middle and merchant classes signed the Treaty of Peace and committed their families to the congregation.