

A short history of
The Church of Scotland

by
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St Ninian is credited with being the first Christian missionary in Scotland when he established a monastery at Whithorn in Galloway in 397 AD as a base to convert the Southern Picts. Details of his life are vague, but it is commonly believed that he was a native of Galloway and trained in Rome before returning home to begin his ministry.

Better known than St Ninian, and particularly significant in the history of the Christian Church in Britain, was St Columba, who in about 563 AD came from Northern Ireland with a number of companions and established a monastery on the Isle of Iona, which became the base for converting the Picts and Celts of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. In 635 AD St Aiden was sent from Iona to establish a monastery on Holy Island (Lindisfarne) in Northumberland, England.

In the 7th Century the church in Scotland, known collectively as the Celtic Church although its disparate branches were not centrally organized, became more unified as a branch of the Roman Catholic Church, but with liturgical differences. The union with Rome was strengthened in the 11th century, however it was never a particularly comfortable union, and discontent began to build.

In 1559, John Knox, a Scot who had been ordained as a priest in the Anglican Church and later worked with John Calvin in Europe, returned to Scotland and began a fierce campaign for Protestantism against Mary Queen of Scots, a devout Catholic. In 1560, the declaration of faith known as the Scots Confession, written by Knox and his colleagues, was accepted by the Scottish Parliament. The celebration of the Roman Mass was outlawed. However, because of opposition by the Anglican Church, it was not until 1690 that Presbyterianism was recognized as the official form of government in the Church of Scotland. People who continued to favour the Episcopal cause were expelled from the Church of Scotland and formed the Scottish Episcopal Church, which became allied with the Anglican Church.

The Presbyterian form of church government differs from the Episcopal form of government by bishops (as in the Anglican Church) in that authority is shared equally by ministers and 'elders' elected from lay members of the church. Each local church is governed by a council known as the Kirk Session, the regional council is the Presbytery, and the national council is the General Assembly. In the 1700s and into the 1800s, the Kirk Session exercised control over the morality of parishioners, and named and censured those brought before it accused of sinning.

There were major schisms within the Church of Scotland in the 1700s and 1800s, which led to the formation of new churches: the Secession Church in 1732 and the Relief Church in 1761 (which in 1847 combined to form the United Presbyterian Church); the Free Church in 1843, when about one-third of the Church of Scotland's members (and most of its members in Coll) broke away; and the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1893, which in 1900 amalgamated with the United Presbyterian Church to form the United Free Church.

The Church of Scotland and its breakaway churches have remained the major Christian denominations in Scotland. Other Protestant churches are present, but the second largest church in terms of membership is the Roman Catholic Church. It survived the Scottish Reformation and the repression that followed, and remained strong in the Western Isles of Barra and Uist. In the 1800s and 1900s its membership was increased significantly by immigrants from Ireland and Europe into the industrial areas of Scotland