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Knox Church: The Day the Floor Fell In Written by Dr. Ron Stewart of Boularderie East On May 31, 1989, people gathered at Knox Church at Ross Ferry, Boularderie Island, for the Ordination and Induction Service for the new minister, Rev. Ritchie Robinson of Englishtown. As the congregation filled the church upstairs, the Licensing Meeting was taking place in the basement. The Licensing was just completed-it was about 7:15 p.m.-when the church floor came down, raining old beams on to the Presbytery meeting that was taking place in the basement. Clinging desperately to pews to keep from sliding into the abyss that had opened up at the front of this tiny rural church, few of the congregation realized that there were people in an even worse predicament below, lying trapped and crushed in the basement. Miraculously, although 20 of the churchgoers sustained injuries (including two who were 94 years of age) and six were admitted to hospital, there were no deaths. Dr. Ron Stewart was at the church with his parents when the floor caved in. This is his account of what happened. Passing by the tiny white church, nestled in a glen only a few arm lengths from the waters of the Bras d'Or Lake, the traveller would not have noticed anything very different on that spring evening in 1989. Built over a century ago, the little church was home to a small congregation who took great pride in its life and upkeep. A neatly lettered sign announced "Knox Presbyterian Church, Ross Ferry," and cars were beginning to fill the field surrounding the church so that latecomers had to park up the steep drive on the roadside. This was a special occasion--the ordination of a new minister to the congregation~a time to renew the faith and to joy in the "ties that bind." Presbyterians from around Cape Breton flocked to the church, heeding the admonition given the previous week in the churches to arrive early and be assured of a seat. A full half-hour before the service, only a few front pews were empty in the main sanctuary that seated about 250 souls. As the congregation gathered upstairs, almost every Presbyterian minister and chief elder in the Presbytery of Cape Breton met in solemn session in the basement room of the church, in prayerful preparation for the rites of the ordination service. The choir gathered in a small room behind the pulpit, and in another part of the basement, out of earshot from the Presbytery meeting, the women were preparing for the social evening that was to follow the service, laying out the heavy tables that would contain the ever-present tea and cakes-essential to any Cape Breton gathering. • I had been long away from Cape Breton, having spent some 15 years in the United States and another two in Toronto. After a stint of two years as a general practitioner in a fishing village along the north coast of Cape Breton, I had ventured to the University of Southern California to enter a residency in emergency medicine. During my seven years in Los Angeles, I had completed my residency and remained on the staff of the department of emergency medicine, later serving as medical director of the paramedic program for the county of Los Angeles. Accepting a position on the staff of the University of Pittsburgh in 1978, I moved to that city-closer to "home"-and was appointed medical director of the department of public safety (fire,



police and ambulance paramedic services), as well as being chief of the division of emergency medicine of the university. As such, I had been involved in many disasters and near-disasters, and had consulted frequently internationally on such terrible happenings. Little did I realize that on that spring evening in Cape Breton, history was to repeat itself. As we neared Knox, we noticed cars parked by the roadside; not a good sign, for it was likely the church was quickly filling. There was, however, some space in the glen around the church, and I drove in, parked and hurried inside to the greeting of many old friends whom I had not seen in some time. The small church, located only metres from the waters of the Bras d'Or, was cleaned and groomed for the occasion. The pulpit and organ were in readiness for the service, and all of us were in our Sunday best in honor of the occasion. From the main doors at the back of the church I could see that most pews were filled, and a neighbor suggested that we would have to sit in front—a dismal prospect for most Presbyterians. As we entered the auditorium of the church, the thought flashed through my mind that the floor seemed to "bounce" as we started down the aisle toward the front. Meanwhile, in the choir room attached to the main body of the church, the husband of our organist wondered aloud why the floor seemed to be "listing," and whether it would support the weight of the full congregation. It didn't. With a resounding crack, shudder and a cloud of 100-year-old dust, the floor of the sanctuary suddenly gave way, falling three metres into the basement of the church, raining beams, sheet metal heating ducts and the congregation down upon the heads of the Presbytery meeting below. Dust, resembling smoke, continued to rise from the ruins, and for an instant there was complete silence. During my career as an emergency physician, I had experienced two Los Angeles earthquakes, attended an explosion with 500 killed and 1,000 injured, several bus accidents, plane crashes and an assortment of riots. But this was different; I was now very intimately involved, and in a very personal way, in a disaster. My initial impulse was to protect my parents, who were walking in front of me, from falling into the heap of rubble. The back part of the floor

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