

[Page 45 - Gaelic Precenting on the North Shore](#)ISSUE : [Issue 27](#)

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Gaelic Precenting on the North Shore John Alex John X. MacDonald: It's just going to die and go in the ground with the dead people. That's the end of it. That's it. Ten years, at the longest, I don't think there's a precentor in Cape Breton Island that is under 65 years old. I'm sure there isn't. (And none coming after them?) None. Even haven't got the Gaelic. (How long since people regularly had precenting as part of the church service?) Oh, there must be 25 years--when Archie Fraser was here, and he left here 25 years ago or more. He always had it. The way they had it then when I was young, and up to about 25 years ago--they'd go to church in the morning and they'd have a Gaelic service. They'd sing three psalms and they'd preach a Gaelic sermon and a prayer. Precent three psalms. Then the minister would change over and he'd start an English service. (Right away?) Right away. The same crowd. (And they'd stay?) Yeah. You were in for two hours. So you came out at 1 o'clock, and everybody went to dinner the nearest place they could--and back to church at 3 o'clock in the afternoon--and all Gaelic in the afternoon. His service wasn't very long, but he'd get two or three of the older people to get up to pray--D. B. MacLeod and Alex Morrison, Kenny Morrison--all of them--and that was it, for that day. And there'd be three precentings in the afternoon too. The chairs were down at the bottom of the pulpit there at French River Church--and there were eight chairs there. And I remember when there was somebody in the eight chairs, Eight precentors. And that was more like 50 years ago. Over 50 years ago, before they had church union. Everybody was going to Presbyterian church. And there were a lot more people living around here then. And everybody going to church, only somebody staying home to look after the home. It was common to see 150 people at French River Church. And they could all sing, they could all follow the precentor. The whole congregation would sing. And there were some women--they were beautiful to listen to. You could hear them a way above the rest. (I suppose then it died out last in the homes.) Yes. And I'll bet the last worship of their lives Kenny Morrison and Alex Morrison had, I'll bet they precented. I'll bet you till the last day--the day of the stroke--I'll bet you they sang that day. And my father was like that. It had to be, had to be--didn't matter if someone else was in here--a Jew or a priest or anybody else--it didn't matter to my father who was here. He was going to do what he was going to do anyhow. Tommy Peggy MacDonald: (Were you taught precenting?) No. Just picked it up, listening to the old fellows when they were precenting in the churches. (Did your father precent?) No. But my mother did. But she never led it. She could sing with the group. (And not in your home.) No, just in church. But before me--my uncle, the Rev. A. D., he's not living today, he was a schoolteacher before he went to college-- and he started a singing class down at the French River Schoolhouse. He taught a lot of the old folks that after that were precentors --he taught them how to read the music of the precenting. I guess, really, they didn't pick it up through that--I think possibly a good many could precent before they ever went to the school--but (45)