

Jubilee of the Baptist Commonwealth and Colonial Society

A note upon the origins of the Society based upon information kindly supplied by its Secretary, Rev. F. C. Morton.

THE Jubilee of the Baptist Commonwealth and Colonial Society is being celebrated this Autumn, although the actual anniversary fell in September, last year. Its origin can be traced to the Assembly of the South African Baptist Union at Grahamstown in 1901 when it was decided to request the Baptists of Britain to form a society for the purpose of aiding and extending Baptist work in South Africa. The Gold Fields Baptist Missionary Society had already been operating since 1899, but it was considered advisable that in the event of the proposed new enterprise being launched the Gold Fields Society should be merged into it.

The desirability of forging stronger links between the churches in this country and the colonies was brought to the notice of the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland by Rev. S. Vincent. It was accordingly resolved to appoint a small committee to consider what might be done and, in particular, to report on the conditions and prospects of the Baptist churches in South Africa.

On the 16th September, 1901, a meeting was held at 19 Furnival Street, London, to consider the appeal of the South African Union and, on the motion of Rev. J. R. Wood and Rev. J. W. Ewing, it was decided to form a society to further Baptist work in South Africa and to invite the churches of the homeland to give it their support. That influential backing was immediately forthcoming is evident from the fact that among those who manifested their close interest in the project were Alexander McLaren, John Clifford, J. H. Shakespeare, F. B. Meyer, Mr. (afterwards Sir) George White, M.P., and others. Meeting in Edinburgh the following month the Council of the Baptist Union expressed its satisfaction at "the formation of the Baptist South African Colonial and Missionary Aid Society for the purpose of helping forward the work of God in South Africa" and commended it to the prayerful and generous consideration of the churches. A Board of Directors, consisting of prominent leaders, was elected to administer the work of the Society. Funds were

by no means plentiful. The first item of income was the balance of the Gold Fields Society, now merged into the larger organisation, which amounted to £1 12s. 11½d. Although the financial response of the churches was disappointing, useful work was done in sending aid to South Africa in the form of money and ministers.

By 1904, some of the Society's active supporters had come to the conclusion that the scope of its activities should be widened to include all the colonies and, in addition, Baptist work in Europe. This was discussed by the Executive committee on 20th June that year. It was agreed that, while it would not be wise to undertake continental work, the suggestion of expanding the Society's scope to include all the colonies was worthy of consideration. The various colonial Unions were written to, and by the time the full Board met on 4th October, favourable replies had been received. In view of the fact, however, that the first Baptist World Congress was to be held in July of the next year, when discussion with colonial representatives would be possible, the matter was referred back to the Executive. The Directors expressed the wish that correspondence with the colonial Unions should continue and that communication should be opened with the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

When the Executives met on 17th April, 1905, it reviewed the work of the Society during the three-and-a-half years of its existence. Disappointment was felt that in spite of repeated and weighty appeals comparatively little support had been forthcoming from the churches. The Executive thought that if a Baptist Colonial Society were to be formed it ought to be organised as part of the official activities of the Baptist Union. But the Directors, meeting on 3rd May, took a less pessimistic view of the situation, while agreeing that in the event of the formation of a Colonial Society it should be organised by the Council of the Baptist Union.

The first Baptist World Congress took place in London in July, 1905, and on the opening day a Colonial Conference was held under the presidency of Mr. Herbert Marnham. After discussion the following resolution, moved by Mr. George White, M.P., seconded by Dr. John Clifford, and supported by nine prominent representatives of Unions and Conventions in Australasia, Canada and South Africa, was carried:—

“That this Conference of representatives of Colonial Baptist Unions, Associations and Conventions is of the opinion that the time has come to form a Baptist Colonial Society for the promotion of closer intercourse between the Baptist churches in the various Colonies and in the Homeland, and for the furtherance of Baptist Principles throughout the Empire, and the desire is hereby expressed that the Directors of the Baptist South African Colonial and Missionary Aid Society will,

in conjunction with the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, proceed to the formation of such a Society, it being understood that the existing South African Aid Society will be merged into the new Society. And it is further understood that no Colonial Baptist Union, Association or Convention shall send any deputation or make any public appeal for financial aid otherwise than through, or under the auspices of, the proposed Baptist Colonial Society."

Unfortunately the Baptist Union Council in October was unable, owing to lack of time, to deal with the Colonial Conference's resolution. When the Society's Directors met the following day they decided to ask for it to be placed in an early and prominent position on the agenda for the next Council meeting and requested that a deputation should be received. Their wishes were evidently met for at the meeting of the Executive on 12th February, 1906, Rev. Forbes Jackson and Mr. Howard Henson reported on their visit to the Council. The Directors were informed on 26th April that the Council could not see its way clear to organising the proposed Colonial Society, but hoped that when it was eventually formed liaison between the Council and the new organisation would be established. Thereupon the Directors agreed to seek an opportunity of placing before the delegates to the Autumn Meetings of the Baptist Union, which were to be held that year in Huddersfield, the desirability of forming a Baptist Colonial Society. Consent to this having been obtained the case was presented to the Assembly at Huddersfield on 2nd October, 1906. Mr. George White, supported by Mr. Herbert Marnham, secured the adoption of the following resolution:—

"That this Assembly is of the opinion that the time has come to form a Baptist Colonial Society for the promotion of closer intercourse between the Baptist churches in the various Colonies and in the Homeland, for the furtherance of Baptist Principles throughout the Empire, and for the planting of churches in new and rapidly developing districts throughout the Colonies.

"The desire is hereby expressed that the Directors of the Baptist South African Colonial and Missionary Aid Society will, in conjunction with the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, proceed to the formation of such a Society, the existing South African Aid Society being merged into the new organisation.

"This Assembly warmly commends the objects of the proposed Society to the prayerful sympathy and generous support of all the Baptist churches in the Homeland."

Thus encouraged the Society appointed on the following day, Dr. John Clifford, Rev. W. Cuff, Rev. J. W. Ewing, Dr. A. McCaig, Rev. Charles Williams, Messrs. G. White, H. Marnham and Mr. H. Henson (Secretary) to confer with the Council. It was decided to communicate with the Colonial Unions and also to seek from the Baptist Missionary Society some endorsement of the Huddersfield resolution. This came the following month

from the General Committee of the B.M.S. which, on 21st November, passed the resolution :—

“That this Committee desires to express its deep interest in the proposals of the Baptist South African Colonial and Missionary Aid Society to extend the sphere of its operations to all the British Colonies, and it heartily wishes it God-speed in its efforts to extend the Redeemer’s Kingdom.”

Eighteen months went by and still the new project had not materialised. But when J. H. Shakespeare asked the Society to appoint representatives to confer with the officers of the Baptist Union on the subject of an Emigration Bureau, the Directors, agreeing to the request, took the opportunity of asking whether the time had not come now to proceed with the formation of the new Colonial Society. They empowered their representatives to deal with the matter at the proposed conference. From these the Executive received, on 15th June, 1908, an interim report and, on 20th December, 1909, Sir George White, Mr. H. Henson and Rev. E. H. Ellis presented a fuller and encouraging account of the negotiations. When the Directors met on 17th February 1910, the terms of the proposed constitution of the new Society were laid before them and received their approval. The general purpose of the Colonial Society was to be that of “furthering the progress of the Baptist Denomination within the British Colonies and Dependencies.” This was to be done by :—

- “(a) Co-operating with the Baptist Union or Convention in the Colony or Dependency in establishing churches.
- (b) Acting as a Board of Reference; supplying official letters of recommendation; and securing ministers and agents for service in the Colonies and Dependencies.
- (c) Acting as an intermediary in relation to the emigration of Baptists to the Colonies and Dependencies.
- (d) Raising funds for the foregoing purposes.”

At length the Baptist Colonial Society was formed on 27th April, 1910, at a meeting held under the presidency of Dr. McCaig at the Baptist Church House. Sir George White, M.P., introduced the subject and Mr. Herbert Marnham moved and Rev. J. E. Ennals seconded the resolution :—

“That this meeting of members of the Baptist South African Colonial and Missionary Aid Society agrees to merge its existence forthwith in the Baptist Colonial Society in accordance with the constitution of the new Society drawn up at the Joint Conference of the Baptist Union Council and the Baptist South African Colonial and Missionary Aid Society held on March 16th, 1910.”

The following officers were elected :—President, Sir George White, M.P.; Vice-President, Dr. McCaig; Treasurer, Mr. John Attenborough; Secretary, Rev. H. Lenton Staines. On

10th February, 1943, when Dr. J. H. Rushbrooke was President, the constitution was amended, some of the alterations reflecting changes which had taken place during the intervening years in political thought and the development of Baptist relationships. Henceforth it was to be known as The Baptist Commonwealth and Colonial Society; instead of "British Colonies and Dependencies" in the statement of purpose there was substituted "Dominions, Colonies, Protectorates, Mandated Territories, or other overseas sections of the British Commonwealth"; in addition co-operation was to be maintained "with the Baptist World Alliance and with any of its affiliated organisations."

The story of the Society's origins is largely the rather prosaic one of committee meetings, conferences and resolutions, but behind these somewhat humdrum activities lay the determination of an enthusiastic band of British Baptists to extend the Kingdom of God and promote the advance of the Baptist witness throughout the world-wide Commonwealth in co-operation with their brethren across the seas. More romantic is the record of the Society's activities in the field. During the years that followed it has, among other things, subsidised pioneer work at Dwellingup in the timber country of Western Australia, shared in supporting new work at the mining centre of Flin Flon, in northern Manitoba, and given aid to South African Baptists in the immense missionary task which confronts them among the eight million Bantu, the Cape Coloured and the Indian population of Natal. It has been the means of introducing to friends and churches overseas, thousands of Baptists who have emigrated to various parts of the Commonwealth. During the late war, Baptists in the Forces training in Commonwealth countries were brought into touch by the Society with homes and churches, where they received a welcome, while in London an Overseas Baptist Chaplains' Fraternal was organised. Last year, when the Festival of Britain brought to these islands large numbers of overseas visitors, the successful Commonwealth Congress was arranged, the Baptists being the only denomination to organise such an event. The Society, as it celebrates its jubilee, may look upon the past with satisfaction and to the future with the confident hope that it will be able to continue and develop its work of deepening the sense of fraternal unity among Baptists in the British Commonwealth and of furthering the advance of the Baptist witness in those lands where flies the British flag.

GRAHAM W. HUGHES.