

Building for the Future (3).

AN account of the origin and development of Baptist work at Brownley Green, Wythenshawe, is one to which parallels could probably be found in many parts of the country, a story of men and women of faith and purpose, to whom a vision was given and who, in face of difficulties and set-backs, pursued that vision with determination and courage, until it became a reality. It is an unfinished story; the work continues in the strong and fervent belief that "the best is yet to be."

Twenty years ago, the area seven to ten miles south of Manchester, on the Cheshire side of the Mersey, was a wide stretch of pleasant, open farm-land, broken by little woods and intersected by winding leafy lanes. Today it is a vast and rapidly expanding housing estate of the Manchester Corporation, designed ultimately to accommodate 100,000 people. Shopping centres, schools, factories and churches have come into being and taken their places in the life of this great community. On a strategic site, near what will eventually be the centre of the estate, stands the Brownley Green Baptist Church.

The Church owes its existence primarily to the Manchester District Baptist Union whose members quickly realised their responsibility before God for the thousands who at the time had no church wherein to worship and no Sunday School for their children. Under the wise and energetic leadership of their secretary, the late Rev. Frank Pickles, they sought to discharge that responsibility by the erection of a Baptist church which would go some small way towards meeting the dire needs of the district. The project received the ready and valuable support of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association and its area superintendent, Rev. H. Motley, as well as the practical encouragement of the Baptist Forward Movement.

On February 13th, 1938, a number of Baptists already living in the district, with others interested, gathered for the first service in an upper-room of a farm-house near the fringe of the estate. In that room, services were held each Sunday and shortly afterwards a Sunday School and Women's League were started. Negotiations for a building-site were already in progress, and after many obstacles had been overcome, a plot of land was purchased at Brownley Green.

The demolition of the farm-house after eight months necessitated removal into a neighbouring cottage, the only available accommodation. Here for nearly two years, the work was

continued under great difficulties. Expansion was impossible, but the fellowship was firmly consolidated and that upper room became a sanctuary where on many occasions the Master met with His disciples.

Meanwhile plans had been drawn up and accepted for a church and school-room, adequately equipped with vestries, classrooms, etc., the architect being Mr. F. H. Brazier, A.R.I.B.A., a member of the Baptist Church at Altrincham. The outbreak of war prevented this scheme from being carried out in its entirety, but a school-chapel was designed in such a way as to make extension possible at a later date. Foundation stones were laid on March 16th, 1940. Four days later, Rev. Frank Pickles, who had arranged and supervised the ceremony, received the home-call. The building was opened on June 22nd, 1940, by Mrs. R. Wilson Black. The inclusive cost of land and building had been £2,800. The £700 which was borrowed to complete this sum, was repaid within seven years of the opening of the building.

In October, 1940, twenty-four members formed themselves into a church and the work expanded rapidly. Largely through the generosity of the Baptist women of Lancashire and Cheshire, the church had for three years the devoted service of a deaconess, Sister Marian. The Sunday School, with an attendance of 120 scholars, had to meet in two sessions. Various mid-week activities for young people were started. The first Baptismal service was held.

In 1945, an agreement was reached with the Beaver Park Church, Didsbury, to call a joint pastor and for four years, Rev. R. Davies ministered to the two churches. The membership at Brownley Green increased to fifty. A Primary Hall was added to the main school in 1948, at a cost of £1,400. Again, a sum of £600 was borrowed of which half has been repaid in less than eighteen months.

At Newall Green, a mile-and-a-half away, in a newly developed section of the estate, a site has been purchased for another Baptist Church and a Sunday School has been started in two workmen's canteens. In February of this year, plans were approved for the erection of a school-chapel similar to that at Brownley Green and it would seem that the future of the two causes is to be closely linked. In an area of this kind, there is little danger of wasteful overlapping. On the other hand, the fellowship and co-operation made possible by vicinity, should bring strength and encouragement to both.

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