

Baptist Beginnings in Trinidad.

JOHAN BUNYAN in his preface to *Grace Abounding* writes :
“ It is profitable for Christians to be often calling to mind the very beginnings of grace with their souls.” This statement is also true of the beginning of Christian Missions and what follows, therefore, is a short survey of the leading events which led to the founding of the Baptist Church in Trinidad.

Mr. George Sherman Cowen, who was the pioneer Baptist missionary, arrived in Trinidad in about 1836 as an agent of the Lady Mico Charity. This Charity originated in 1666 when Lady Mico left the sum of £1,000 for redeeming “poore Christian slaves” who had been captured by the Bey of Algiers. When the Mediterranean had been cleared of pirates and there were no more slaves to redeem, the Court of Chancery ordered that the money should be invested in certain funds and conveyed to Lady Mico’s executors. By the middle of the nineteenth century the amount had increased to £160,000. In 1834, Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton suggested that this might be spent on the education of the former slaves. A Charter was obtained and the British Government added a grant of £17,000 for five years for the same purpose. As a result, schools were established in several West Indian Islands including Trinidad. Mr. Cowen, a British Baptist, acted as inspector. In 1842, the funds of the Mico Charity were nearly exhausted and Mr. Cowen, seeing the spiritual needs of the people, made an urgent appeal to the Baptist Missionary Society to appoint him as a missionary, but owing to agreements with the Wesleyan Missionary Society they were unable to answer the call.

It so happened that in God’s good Providence there was at this time an English lady named Mrs. Revell residing in Trinidad, who had for many years lived in Amherst, Nova Scotia. Mrs. Revell had been baptised by the famous Dr. Rippon, minister of Carter Lane Church in Southwark, and on being left a widow she had entered business, which during the course of her life, led her to cross the Atlantic some twenty-two times. She, too, shared Mr. Cowen’s desire for the establishment of a Baptist Church in Trinidad and by her personal visits to the Mission House, then in Moorgate Street, and her insistent appeals, she persuaded the Society to appoint Mr. Cowen, who took up his office in 1843. The newly-appointed missionary was alert to see

the importance of Port-of-Spain as a strategic centre, and so occupied premises in Corbeau Town, now known as Sackville Street, where he was able to witness to the fishermen who plied their boats in the Gulf of Paria. Among the members of this infant church was Maria Jones, an African slave and daughter of a chief who had first come under the influence of John Thompson, a Presbyterian, and had later been received into membership at Greyfriars Presbyterian Church. At the age of about sixty she began to learn to read her New Testament and, being known to Mr. Cowen, he enlisted her services in distributing tracts—a service in which she delighted. One of these tracts dealt with believers' baptism and Maria became convinced that baptism was clearly taught in the New Testament. Later she was baptised in the sea by Mr. Cowen. Little is known of the other members, but we may be sure that it was a mixed community consisting of the freed slaves from Trinidad and other West Indian Islands as well as some Negro-Americans who came here in about 1816. Property was soon acquired in Pembroke Street which formerly had been a part of the old Spanish Cabildo or City Council: the lower part was used for worship while the upper portion accommodated the missionary and his wife. In the first year, Mr. Cowen baptised twenty and the number at the various stations were fifty-one. In 1845 the Rev. John Law arrived to take charge of this work in the city and, in the year 1854, the Church now known as St. John's was opened on the site adjoining the manse; from this time the work began to increase rapidly. In this brief survey reference should be made to John Law's work as a printer. A poem entitled, "The Baptism" was printed in 1845 on paper made of plantain leaf and when the Portugese refugees came from Madeira in 1846, the Rev. John Law held worship for them every Sunday in Portuguese, and he used his printing press and plantain leaf paper to provide hymn sheets for them.

Mr. Cowen, being released from the north, took up his residence in the south at Princes Town then called "The Mission," where he laboured until his death in 1852 at the age of forty-two. The Baptist church in the south was located in rural districts known then as "The American Villages" and it owed its origin to the Negro-American families who first settled here a short time after the Battle of New Orleans. These loyal slaves who had fought with the British Armies in the American War of Independence were granted sixteen acre portions of land as compensation for their services and they named their districts after their old regimental companies. There is no indication that the second company ever settled here, but the remaining five still retain their names. These loyal soldiers who came from Virginia and South Carolina brought with them their Baptist faith, but

it was not until Mr. Cowen commenced work that the church became properly organised. Many difficulties were encountered in the early days, due to the fact that for many years these settlers had lived in very isolated districts, and as a result, African customs and superstitions became incorporated in their religious belief. Camp meetings were occasions of much disorder and drunkenness, the all-night shouting meetings had also become a common feature. The nature of these meetings consisted in singing and clapping, while many would work themselves up in excitement, and begin to jump up violently and shout until they passed into a kind of epileptic fit and at length fall exhausted to the ground. In this state they were regarded as being under conviction of sin and upon coming out of the stupor were expected to make profession of faith.

Mr. Cowen was assisted in his work by Mr. Augustus Inniss, a schoolmaster and catechist. Property in a number of villages was acquired and schools were started. Preaching stations were established at Mount Elvin, Woodlands, Sherringville, Indian Walk and Mount Hopeful. In 1852 Fourth Company Church was built and became the real centre of the southern district. In addition to preaching, Mr. Cowen was able to minister to the sick, having made some study of medicine. He met with much hostility from the village people on account of his efforts to put down heathen practices.

Mr. Cowen was succeeded in 1856 by the Rev. W. H. Gamble. The name of the Rev. George Cowen thus deserves an honoured place in the roll of Baptist pioneers. His resting place has recently been discovered in Princes Town and we hope at some future date to mark this place with a more permanent memorial; at St. John's a marble plaque has been placed above the pulpit to his memory. This valiant warrior truly fought the good fight and today we thank God for his noble life.

SIDNEY G. POUPARD.

Jubilee Souvenir of London Road Baptist Church, Portsmouth 1902-1952. Prepared by Mr. J. Rawlinson, this illustrated booklet outlines the story of the church which began as an off-shoot of Lake Road and owes much to the ministry (1915-39) of the late Rev. John Edmonds. The chapel was erected in 1902, but the church was not formally constituted until 1904.