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Collecting for a New Building in 1735

When the Messengers, Elders and church representatives met in Glasshouse Yard, Goswell Street, London, in May, 1735, for the Annual Assembly of the General Baptists, the chief item of business concerned the negotiations which had been proceeding for some years with churches in Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire. These churches were the conservatives of their day. They remained loyal to the ways of their seventeenth-century fathers. Acceptance of the historic creeds of the ancient church presented no difficulties to them. They were suspicious of the contemporary movement away from the traditional trinitarian statements. They objected even more strongly to the growing popularity of congregational hymn-singing. The answer given by the Assembly to the representations from Northamptonshire on these matters was a temperate one and may be read in W. T. Whitley's edition of the *Minutes* (vol. II, pp. 32-34).

The Assembly also had to consider requests from Great Yarmouth, Wendover and Haringworth for help with the building of new meeting-houses. Each of these cases was approved and the friends were advised that they "either by Messengers appointed for that Purpose or by Letters, apply to such Persons and Churches within their reach, to desire their assistance in so good a Work." (*op. cit.*, p. 34.)

This the Baptists of Haringworth had already done. The village lies in the northern part of the county of Northamptonshire, not far from the Rutlandshire boundary. There had been a Baptist community there since the middle of the seventeenth century. In the days of persecution under the Clarendon Code it had been led by a local farmer and carpenter, whose descendants for three or four generations were to play influential parts in Baptist life. The Stangers provide an early and notable example of a family succession among the Baptists. In the 1730s, the leaders of the Haringworth church included Matthew and James Stanger, two of the sons of the farmer-carpenter. Their brother, William, had moved to Moulton and, in addition to farming there, was pastor of the local Baptist church and a "Messenger," which among the General Baptists meant one with wider duties of oversight and leadership. William Stanger was one of the six Messengers present at the Assembly in Goswell Street in May, 1735.

There has recently come into the possession of the Baptist Union, a letter sent by the Harringworth church to the Wisbech church in March, 1735. Though more than two hundred years old, it is in an excellent state of preservation and will be kept in the library at the Baptist Church House. It explains that the Harringworth friends were under the necessity of providing themselves with a new meeting-house and were having to do this at Morcott, in Rutlandshire. The letter is addressed "To Mr. William Fisher, at Emmene nere friday bridge and nere Wisbich in the Isle of Ely and County of Cambridge" and was sent by way of London for delivery "by Wisbech Bagg."

Like the General Baptist cause in Harringworth, that at Wisbech dated from the middle of the seventeenth century. William Fisher was the Elder or pastor there from 1732 to 1747.

The text of the letter is as follows :

To the church and congregation of baptised believers professing the general redemption and love of God in Christ to all mankind, etc. in and about Wisbech and Emmene we your beloved brethren in the same faith in and about Harringworth and North Luffenham—send greeting.

For as much as it hath pleased God in the course of his common providence to suffer our antient meeting at Harringworth of near an hundred years standing to be broken up by reason every tenant there is under the tennor and command of one landlord who is very much averse to our cause and a great enemy to dissenters in general and so will not suffer any meeting to be kept in any of his holds and houses since last Christmas and there is not a house in the town but what is his excepting three or four whose owners are also enemys to the baptist cause without any just occasion so from those considerations we are faced for the churches publick good and convenancy and the honour of the gospell to buy and purchase a place at Morcot in the county of Rutland partly in the midst of our congregation : and it must be paid for on Lady Day next, and though it is very convenient yet much out of repair for that use; so that what with buying and repairing we are not ourselves able or capable to compleat the same but must paune it will we can have supply—do therefore beg and desire of you our brethren in the same faith if you please to be assistant in Christian charity to cast in your mites to help us herein, as we have always at all times when desired been willing and free to contribute and be assistant in such cases of necessity to others our brethren and as aforesaid we have been willing to help others, so we now have cause to beg the like help of you and others in the same faith, promising if ever you or others should have the like occasion we

shall not be negligent to contribute our mites according to our abilities as we hope you will be ready and willing at this time in our necessity to help us, and what you please to do in this behalf we would beg and desire you would not delay it, and that it might be conveyed to our friend Abraham Bull of Whittlesea and from thence to Mr. James Watts at Thorp by Peterborough or any way safe the first opportunity so we in behalf of the rest of our friends wishing all Grace and the love of God may continue grow and abound amongst you, subscribing our names as here underwritten

ffrom the Church at North
Luffenham in the County of
Rutland
dated March 2d 1734-5

Matthew Stanger
Ja. Stanger
Tho. Slater
Jos : Slater
Robert Young
Danll. Curtis
? Will paidmor
Samuel Meres
Stephen Curtis
William Laxton

friends whoever of you pay the
postage of this letter we will
pay you again and for your
trouble

Of the signatures Matthew and James Stanger have already been mentioned. Stephen Curtis was no doubt the son of a man of the same name, who is known to have been a leader of the Harringworth church and who died in February 1727. (See J. H. Wood, *A Condensed History of the General Baptists*, 1847, p. 155.)

On the inside sheet of the letter is a list of fifteen names and contributions of 1/6, 1/- or 6d. totalling 12/- in all. Postage is noted as costing 7d. 11/5 is said to have been "sent to our Brethren" on April 6th, 1735. William Fisher gave 1/-. Among the other contributors were John Sharman and Simon Tiptaft. A John Sharman was Elder in Wisbech from 1710 to 1723; this was perhaps his son. A Simon Tiptaft appears as a representative of the Horsleydown Church at the General Baptist Assemblies in 1746, 1751, 1758 and 1760.

The church at Wisbech joined the New Connexion in 1785; that at Morcott did the same in 1816. In due course both entered into membership with the Baptist Union.

ERNEST A. PAYNE