

THE WORK OF THE HERTFORDSHIRE BAPTIST UNION

A CASE-STUDY IN RURAL MISSION

Until the early nineteenth century it could be generally said that the main strength of Baptists lay in the towns and cities of the United Kingdom. From that time on, however, strong efforts were made by town churches, through individual initiatives or through Associations, to evangelise and plant churches in the villages.

Such was most certainly the case in Hertfordshire where two different means seem to have emerged in the formation of new village causes. Strong urban churches promoted new causes by their evangelism or encouraged new offshoots from concentrations of their members who resided in villages. Alternatively, the associations sponsored systematic evangelism by supporting full-time evangelists and lay preachers in areas without churches.

Generally, this distinction gets blurred as it is evident that the Union supported town churches' mission stations also, but in turn they depended on the main town churches for funds and personnel.

The Hertfordshire Baptist Union

Between 1810 and 1878 Baptists' rural evangelism in Hertfordshire was pursued jointly with the Independents in the form of an organisation called "The Hertfordshire Union". In 1878, the formation of the Congregational Home Mission Society necessitated the withdrawal of their support from the Hertfordshire Union. Its work amongst Baptist village causes was taken on by a new Hertfordshire Baptist Union formed "to promote Christian union amongst associated churches and assist smaller churches and village preaching stations by grants and otherwise to consolidate and extend the work of Christ in connection with the associated churches in the county...". Its membership comprised all Particular Baptist churches in Hertfordshire except those of a "Strict" character and those already affiliated to other county Unions, e.g. Buckinghamshire and Essex. It immediately took on the work of grant-aiding most of the village churches and missions formed earlier in the century.

The Essendon Mission

It was not long however before the Union sought to extend the Baptists' work in the villages. In their committee meeting of December 1880, attention was drawn to the work of a Mr A. H. King of The Pastors College (i.e. Spurgeon's) in Essendon and Hatfield Hyde amongst others. These were small villages in the vicinity of Hatfield where no nonconformist witness existed and the Union agreed to fund it and support the work as they could, having received a letter commending Mr King from C. H. Spurgeon and Mr W. Sampson, Secretary of the Baptist Union. By the Union annual meeting in June 1881,

King was being given £1 per week and this continued. In June 1883, the Committee noted that a piece of land had been donated at Essendon, and at the June assembly in 1884 an appeal was made for £200 to build the mission hall. In May 1885 Mr King's labours were reported in detail and despite house to house visitation, open air and cottage meetings, he did not appear to be making much progress. The cottage he was using, for which the Union paid 2s.6d. per week, was badly located and there was the "strong influence of the Church" which kept people from attending meetings despite the help they received from the missionary. The Committee however obviously felt that a new mission hall would turn the tide and agreed a tender of £146 for a 120 seat iron chapel to be named "The Essendon District Mission Hall" and it was opened on 22nd October, 1885.

Burnham Green

The Committee then felt that Mr King was freer to some degree for other extension work, as at their December meeting it was agreed that supply preachers should be arranged at Essendon so that he might preach once a fortnight at Burnham Green. This village was in another area north of Welwyn where no nonconformist witness existed at all. By December 1886 the evangelist was regularly using a converted farm building of Earl Cowper for services which by 1887 were established to be supervised (with Essendon) by the minister of Dagnall Street Church, St Albans, the Rev. C. M. Hardy.

A Second Evangelist at Datchworth

In 1888, the Union continued their momentum on development of new rural missions by appointing a second full-time evangelist, Mr Silvester. They were assisted with his salary by half of its payment being provided by Herbert Marnham (a local man and Treasurer of the Baptist Union 1900-1935). Initially it was intended that the missionary should work at Knebworth and although Silvester and his wife found a house there, in the event this did not materialise. This may have been due to the fact that the Congregationalists were establishing a church there at the time. Initially the evangelist held meetings at four cottages at Datchworth, two at Woolmer Green and one at Bradbury End, villages to the east of Knebworth. In 1889 the Union acquired a cottage at Datchworth Green where the work was then centred. This soon proved to be too small and in 1893 a mission room was built adjacent to it. Funds came again from the generosity of Mr Marnham in both cases. Between 1891 and 1895 a branch was also run at Aston near Stevenage in a rented cottage but with the work being centred at Datchworth, the Aston branch was passed over to a local resident, Mrs Metcalfe. On 7th July 1896, 33 members were enrolled to form a Church at Datchworth by the Rev. C. S. Hull of Tilehouse Street Baptist Church, Hitchin. The trustees were the Secretary and Treasurer of the Hertfordshire Baptist Union. Subsequently the work flourished as 14 members were added in the following year with the necessity for an enlargement of the premises which was completed in 1897. In 1900 the Church had 47 members, 40 children in its Sunday School and 6 local preachers.

Essendon and Burnham Green - A Chequered History

King's work at Essendon and Burnham Green did not flourish. In 1891 poor attendances at both missions were reported to the Union Committee. In 1894 the evangelist was asked to resign with the comment that he was good at visiting but had gained few to attend the Essendon mission hall. Circumstances may have improved after this as King stayed on and in 1900 the Directory records 24 "members" and 30 children attending both missions. By 1908 King's work had developed sufficiently at Burnham Green to warrant the building of a chapel on the same lines as that at Datchworth. Where its funding came from is uncertain as the Hertfordshire Baptist Union did not raise funds. In 1909 however Mr King died and Hugh Bowden, a book-seller in Hertford and colporteur at the Codicote Baptist Mission, took over as evangelist at Essendon whilst Burnham Green was associated with Datchworth under Mr Silvester. In 1910 however the Essendon work was at a low ebb with but 2 adults associated and 24 children, and it was not surprising that in 1911 Bowden resigned as evangelist, disheartened through lack of support from the villagers. Mr Bentley and Mr Bushell from Hertford then took over on a joint basis with some initial success. In 1914, however, they reported to the Union Committee that it was useless to continue in face of "persistent opposition of the Church party who had brought great pressure to bear upon the people to prevent their attendance at the Hall with the result that hardly anyone attended now". The Committee agreed to close the Hall. In 1916 the new Hertford pastor, Rev. H. R. Cripps, sought to re-open the mission. The Hertfordshire Baptist Association (renamed 1913) agreed for him to spend up to £10, which was executed (including repairs as a result of a Zeppelin raid). Little seems to have been done after this, however, and in 1919 it was agreed to sell the land and reconstruct the hall at Hoddesdon to be used by its recently opened Baptist Church for a Sunday School.

Datchworth - Progress then Disintegration

From its successful start, Datchworth held its own for a while but then started to decline. In 1910 membership had declined to 32 members from 47 in 1900 and by 1920 this had continued to 24. An analysis of the church roll is instructive in illuminating the real picture behind these somewhat depressing figures.

Origin of Membership 1896-1920

Original foundation - evangelised	33
Profession of faith/baptized	54
Transfer in	15
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Total	102

Changes in Church Roll 1896-1920

Death	9
Removal/Resignation	14
Transfers	27
Moved from area (not transferred)	28
Remainder	24
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Total	102
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It is evident that Silvester's Church was one formed from new converts or adherents with 87 out of 102 members during 1896-1920 of this character. The "losses" of these were high with a proportion of 55 out of 102 leaving the area. (8 of the transfers, to the Codicote Baptist Mission in 1901, transferred to a new cause convenient to their residence). When viewed against an awareness of the agricultural decline going on in the countryside at the time and the growing attractiveness of neighbouring towns, it is not so surprising. During the period the population of the parish registered steady decline. (Census 1901 - 676, Census 1911 - 550). Where their destination is known, most left for surrounding towns and London, though two emigrated to Canada and four departed for Scotland. The losses from removal from the roll were relatively few, some through misconduct and at least two drawn (back?) to the Parish Church. In all, one can appreciate the disheartening effect to Stephen Silvester of the loss by moving out of members who had been converted or drawn to the Baptists through his ministry. An additional impact was the upheaval of World War I whose unsettling effect was vividly recorded in the Church book, such as communion services being terminated at Datchworth "on account of the danger to the local preachers from bombing" and the annual meeting being suspended "on account of the danger from Air Raids". Only five members were recruited during the war period and many more lost.

Silvester retired as missionary in August 1920, handing over to the Rev. R. E. Mills. The long and faithful work of the Hertfordshire Union evangelist was marked by a service of thanksgiving addressed by Herbert Marnham amongst others, with the vicar of Datchworth in the chair (showing much better relations than at Essendon!). Mills lasted a very short time as minister however, leaving at the end of 1921 having apparently caused such difficulties that the Hertfordshire Baptist Union Committee was induced to seek his resignation.

The Union then asked Mr Parvis of Hemel Hempstead to take the pastorate, which he agreed to do if a house was provided. This did not appear to be possible so was not proceeded with. This hiatus appears to have resulted in the closure of the chapel for some time, since in October 1922 the Church book records the re-opening of the chapel by "the Pioneer Mission" led by Mr F. D. Price, the missionary. The Union agreed to a support of £10 per quarter and that Mr Cripps of Hertford Baptist Church should be moderator. The Sunday School was recommenced with 22 scholars. At the end of 1923, however, lack

of adequate accommodation for the missionary forced the withdrawal of the Pioneer Mission and once again the chapel closed. In July 1925 the Association tried again and appointed Mr Vivien Sutton to the pastorate in a full time capacity and in November the Church and Sunday School were again re-opened. This time, under stable leadership, the cause was notably successful in its Sunday School and a mid-week young people's service. In December 1927, it was decided to reconstitute the "Church associated with the Baptist causes at Datchworth and Burnham Green" with a renewed Church roll of 8 members. 1929 however brought renewed difficulties as Mr Sutton announced his resignation and departed in August.

Burnham Green 1910 - 1928

Under Stephen Silvester work went in parallel with Datchworth, alternate Church meetings and monthly offerings being held. After his resignation the mission remained open with a good Sunday School and reasonably attended services arranged by one of the members of Hertford Baptist Church - Mr Savage - under the oversight of its minister. It was served by lay preachers who continued to assist when Vivien Sutton became its minister jointly with Datchworth.

Further Upheaval and Reorganisation of the Missions 1928 - 1932

The departure of Mr Sutton resulted in the Hertfordshire Baptist Association arranging oversight separately, with Datchworth being linked with Bunyan Baptist Church, Stevenage and Burnham Green coming under Hertford. A lay pastor, Mr J. Barker, with the Rev. H. R. Cripps of Hertford, proceeded to run Burnham Green very successfully with congregations rising sharply from around 20 on a Sunday night to 40-50, and the Sunday School similarly prospering. Datchworth did not flourish and the Stevenage deacons were soon suggesting the chapel be closed, as congregations were meagre and the building needed £100 of expenditure to put it into repair. The Association could not see its way to providing further support either, in view of its other heavy commitments. In September 1929, however, Mr J. F. Keeble, a member of Hertford Baptist Church, was appointed as lay pastor under Hertford's oversight. The joint arrangement with Burnham Green was then restored formally by a constituted "Missions Committee" formed to procure "the amicable working of the two Mission Churches and the oversight of the finance and the general policy of the work". This was composed of 2 members of each mission, its lay pastor and 2 members of Hertford Baptist Church, and was to meet every quarter to consider reports from each church meeting as well as its own business. This was set up on 31st May, 1930. During this time financial help was given to both causes by the Association, with Burnham Green receiving £25 for alterations and repairs and Mr J. F. Keeble an honorarium of £20 which he chose to spend on repairs to the Datchworth chapel. The Datchworth cause recovered to an extent with Mr Keeble's labours and sponsored a tent mission led by Edgar Keeble, his son, then a Spurgeon's College student. A women's meeting, savings bank and magazine distributed to all the village, were also started.

1933 - Separation and the Subsequent History of the Missions

In 1933 oversight of both causes was transferred from Hertford Baptist Church to the Association, on the resignation of Hertford's minister.

At Burnham Green work proceeded under the successful leadership of Mr Barker. At this time it was very much "the place" to go on a Sunday and was a close fellowship of village families. In 1937 its hall was restored and heating installed by the labours of its members. In wartime difficulties ensued. Its Sunday School was closed and damage occurred to its building requiring £10 to be spent on repairs in 1944. In 1948 Mr Barker retired from his work as an engine driver and was granted a £15 honorarium since he intended to put more time into the work. By this time it is apparent that its pre-war days were over and the families that supported it were dying out. Their young people were not however attending in their place. Probably in 1951 Mr Barker gave up and the work went downhill rapidly despite the attempts of some lay preachers, notably Mr S. Sutton of Hertford, to keep it open. In mid-1953 the building was closed and let to the Methodist Church. Its sale occurred in 1955 with the proceeds of £900 going suitably to assist the funds of Hydean Way Baptist Church, Stevenage, who were building a new church in the New Town.

At Datchworth the work struggled on under the devoted leadership of Mr Keeble. In 1938 the chapel was modernized and repainted with new chairs and gas lighting installed. The cost of the work - £35 - was met by the Association. Wartime evidently brought considerable upheavals to the district but the chapel remained open and services held. Amongst the work the chapel did was to hold a Sunday School for 20-30 evacuee children and on several occasions entertain parties of East Enders associated with West Ham Central Mission. Time and money were available to install a new stove and a new organ. The Women's Meeting however had to close in 1944 because women were employed in a new munitions factory in Woolmer Green as well as engaged in entertaining evacuees. This was however reinstated after the war ended. A new crisis struck the cause in March 1948 when Mr Keeble died. Leadership passed to the deacon Mr Miller and the secretary Mrs Joys, and the pulpit was supplied by the Hertfordshire Baptist Lay Preachers Federation. Quite soon a new lay pastor - Mr Wood from Bunyan Baptist Church - took over and under his leadership the Sunday School was re-established. In 1950, he was succeeded by a Mr Garner from Watford but after a probationary year he felt unable to continue through ill health. On his withdrawal a new lease of life came to the chapel when Christ Church, Welwyn Garden City under its minister the Rev. K. Parkinson, made the chapel a branch. This meant it provided full support and quite soon a new lay pastor, Mr R. Sherry. Its Sunday School, services and women's meeting were well attended during this time. In 1957 the chapel became independent once again. Its consequent history was one of ups and downs, but eventually leading to closure. Despite substantial

efforts of lay pastors and members from the village, numbers attending slowly declined. In 1970 no replacement was evident for its last pastor Mr Wheatley and services were then held sporadically though the Sunday School was retained. In 1976 the building was deteriorating and the Association decided finally the time had come to close the chapel. In 1978 the chapel was auctioned and conversion approved for its use as a dwelling.

Conclusion

Throughout the story of these now extinct mission churches, several themes have emerged that are instructive to those seeking to maintain a nonconformist witness in rural areas. All three causes were dependent on external support for the ministry of the Word and leadership. Initially this came through the paid evangelists and later from lay pastors resident outside the village supported by the County Lay Preachers Association and students. Maintenance of their buildings also became dependent on Association finance. When external support failed there was a crisis. Underneath this it is evident that the nonconformist tradition had shallow roots in these villages as notably seen at Essendon where active "Church" opposition occurred. It is also noticeable that the cause at Burnham Green, most distant from a Parish Church, flourished most and the others quite close to major Parish Churches were weaker. Finally, particularly in the post-war period, it is clear that the chapels failed to hold the young people of their adherents and bring them into active membership. Transformation of the social structure of the villages took place too. From the rural, agricultural and service character they had in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century and particularly after World War II, the villages became rural retreats for urban families whose life and work were associated with the rapidly growing industrial and commercial life of neighbouring towns. To them the chapels were a survival of a bygone era. Even of those who were nonconformist Christians moving into the villages to live, possession of a car and desire to participate in a larger town church meant that they did not link with the local village cause.

Sources

- 1 Datchworth Church Book 1896-1970.
- 2 Hertfordshire Baptist Association General Committee Minutes 1878-1957.
- 3 Kellys Directory 1910.
- 4 Hertford Baptist Church Minute Books 1897-1973.
- 5 Personal interview - Mr & Mrs L. Ansell, Mr B. Keeble.
- 6 Baptist Union Directories 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941 and 1951.

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