

BUSINESSMEN IN INTERDENOMINATIONAL ACTIVITY

Birmingham Youth for Christ, 1940s-1950s

This short article is an account, drawn from primary sources, of an urban evangelistic movement in the post-war world. It focuses upon the role of businessmen in a religious movement. In particular, it highlights the part played by Alfred George Beech Owen (1908-1975), later Sir Alfred Owen, the highly energetic and widely respected chairman of Rubery, Owen & Co., an engineering firm based on the Black Country and the largest private company in Britain in the 1950s (when it employed over 12,000). AGB (as he was called) was best known to the British public in the late 1940s and the 1950s as the sponsor of the BRM (British Racing Motors) grand prix racing car, in which Graham Hill won the world championship in 1962. AGB was also prominent in local government in Staffordshire and served as Pro-Chancellor of Keele University, 1962-70.¹ The article illustrates several themes: the potential of lay leadership in interdenominational activity; the importance of counterbalancing personalities in church organisations; and the need for strict stewardship and accountability in the management of resources put at the disposal of evangelistic enterprises.

I

Birmingham Youth for Christ (YFC) was organised in November 1946 after two American evangelists had visited the city. They belonged to Youth for Christ International Inc., a movement originating in Chicago in April 1944 when a young Chicago businessman, George M. Wilson, decided he must try to offer spiritual help to servicemen in transit to various theatres of war. George M. Wilson's Saturday night rallies caught the attention and support of Chicago pastor, teacher and broadcaster, Torrey M. Johnson. By the end of the war Youth for Christ International Inc. was sending evangelists abroad. Two of these young men, then wholly unknown in Europe, Billy Graham and Cliff Barrows, came to England. Between October 1946 and March 1947 they spoke and preached at 360 meetings in 27 British cities. In Birmingham reports of American 'hot gospel' showmanship disturbed staid evangelicals as much as theological liberals. Ministers snubbed organisers, the first night of a ten-day campaign drew less than 300 people, and the City Hall booking was cancelled. Graham persisted, telephoning and visiting clergy, many of whom were reassured after meeting and talking with him. By the end of their stay in Birmingham, Graham and Barrows at least had the local evangelicals on their side.²

The visit left one group of Birmingham men determined to use the methods of mass evangelism. Among them was A. G. B. Owen. He and his wife opened their Sutton Coldfield home for the duration of the Americans' visit to Birmingham and became 'Mom' and 'Pop' to the Barrows, a friendship that endured.³ Billy Graham, who stayed at a hotel during that first Birmingham campaign, also visited the Owens at Sutton Coldfield. These encounters with the International YFC evangelists convinced AGB of the merits of their form of Christian outreach and of the genuineness of the evangelists themselves. Inspiration required organisation. Here AGB's managerial skills, civic weight (he was then a borough councillor) and financial resources played their part. The group that formed around him, however, emerged from pre-existing evangelical organisations and traditions in Birmingham. (See Table below).

One of these was the Pocket Testament League Choir, formed in the late 1920s

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under the auspices of the PTL (founded 1908) by Mrs Alexander Dixon - née Helen Cadbury (1877-1969), daughter of Richard and niece of George; her first husband was Charles McCallon Alexander (1867-1920), American evangelist of Torrey and Alexander fame; she was a rare interwar example of an evangelical Quaker, though after her second marriage she attended her husband's Baptist church.⁴ Mrs Dixon energetically supported the PTL, opening her large and beautiful house, 'Tennessee', in Moseley for its meetings in the 1920s and 1930s. The PTL Choir was later renamed the Ambassador Choir; it closed down in 1939 but was revived for YFC meetings in 1946.⁵

The other sources of support for the incipient YFC branch in Birmingham were activists in the Crusaders' Union and the Young Life Campaign. Crusaders catered for middle class and public schoolboys. A. G. B. Owen became an enthusiastic Crusader leader after his conversion at Cambridge and, on returning to the family firm in 1929, co-led the Sutton Coldfield Crusader class, eventually becoming national treasurer of the Crusader Union. The Young Life Campaign, founded in 1911 by the brothers Frederick and Arthur Wood, was another non-uniformed but, unlike the Crusader movement at that time, usually church-linked evangelistic organisation aiming at the promotion of consecration and service among Christian young people. By the early 1930s it had over 11,000 members.⁶ These groups and their supporters offered a supply of lay leaders across a wide spectrum of evangelical denominations.

The backgrounds of the laymen who spearheaded Birmingham Youth for Christ are suggested in the Table. Denominationally, the Working Committee in charge in 1949 consisted of two Anglican laymen, three Baptists and two from the Brethren. The only minister involved was in the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, a federation of conservative evangelical nonconformist churches. Most of the leaders were also engaged in the work of the Young Life Campaign or Crusaders. All the laymen on the YFC Committee worked in industry or commerce, four in manufacturing, three in services. Of the seven, only two had their own businesses, A. G. B. Owen in large-scale manufacturing industry, William Day as a confectionary agent. That is, the majority were middle managers or below, two of them in large companies: Brunskill at Lucas and Barnes with Phoenix Insurance.

By 1948 the activities of the Birmingham YFC largely comprised a monthly Saturday night rally, held in Birmingham Town Hall. Musical items, led by a choir or performed by a soloist, were interspersed with special items (e.g. testimonies, a brains trust, a display) and climaxed with an address by a guest speaker who always concluded with an appeal to hearers to commit their lives to Christ.⁷ To attract outsiders, small groups of 'fishers' would scour the streets of central Birmingham, persuading other youngsters to come to the rally.⁸ Frequently 2000 or more would attend and on some occasions people were turned away.⁹ At the end of May 1949 Billy Graham and Cliff Barrows, again touring Britain on behalf of Youth for Christ International, conducted one of these Saturday night rallies.¹⁰

AGB was unquestionably the dominant figure in Birmingham YFC. He was the only member common to both the Working Committee or 'Team' (which met monthly to plan the next one or two rallies) and the Advisory Council (comprising lay and clerical figures), acting as honorary treasurer of the former and as chairman of the latter. At the mundane level of treasurer, he took charge of the money raised by the rallies (from collections, sale of programmes and collecting boxes) and saw that it was safely banked - using the assistance of his children, and later of his company finance department, to count it out.¹¹ He also ensured that the rally accounts did not stray too far or for too long into deficit.¹² As chairman he not infrequently took the chair at rallies. He also assumed a valuable public relations

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BIRMINGHAM YOUTH FOR CHRIST:
MEMBERS OF WORKING COMMITTEE 1949

NAME	CHURCH	LINK TO YFC	OCCUPATION	COMPANY
Owen, Alfred G. B.	Church of England	Crusaders	industrialist	Rubery Owen & Co
Brunskill, J. Arthur	Baptist	Young Life Campaign	work study specialist	Lucas
Barnes, Reg F.	Baptist	Young Life Campaign & Crusaders & Ambassador Choir	insurance co inspector	Phoenix Insurance
Day, William M.	Brethren	Pocket Testament League & Ambassador Choir	confectionary agent	self-employed
Dipple, J. Stan	Brethren	Young Life Campaign	shoe shop manager	
Gosden, Vernon J.	Baptist	Young Life Campaign	personnel manager	Midland Electric Mfg Co
Trew, Richard (Dick) F.	Church of England		technical representative	Langley London Ltd
White, Reg F. Revd	Independent (FIEC)	Young Life Campaign	church minister	

SOURCES: Rubery Owen Archives, 1949-50, BI.9, Birmingham YFC file. letterhead of Rev. R. White to A. G. B. Owen, 25 September 1948; information from Messrs R. F. Trew and William H. Day in letters to author from R. F. Trew, 6, 17 September, 22 October 1986.

role. He successfully invited the Lord Mayor of Birmingham to a rally in April 1948, though another engagement prevented the Lord Mayor attending a year later, when the new Rector of Birmingham, Canon Bryan Green (a specialist in evangelism¹³), was speaking. No doubt AGB's civic weight was a factor behind Vernon Gosden's successful application to the Regional Petroleum Officer for an extra allowance of petrol (under the rationing regulations) for journeys in connection with Birmingham YFC publicity.¹⁴

Equally importantly, AGB helped to shaped YFC policies. For a retreat meeting of Birmingham YFC leaders held at Malvern, he wrote a paper in spring 1949 in which he reviewed the format and content of the YFC rallies. He was most unhappy about 'the early and rather raucous music that comes from the gramophone'; wanted more young people fitted into the programme; thought that those on the

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platform might look rather more happy (though considered 'the Americans are somewhat inclined to overdo the atmosphere of striking too light a vein in the programme itself'); and urged the use of 'outstanding Christians, on the field of music, sports &c.'. Two recommendations he made particularly reflected his background as a layman and industrialist. 'We should, at all costs, avoid the usual rut into which rallies like our own are inclined to get with the alternation of hymn, prayer, hymn, bible reading, hymn, talk'. Secondly, 'I am sure that the fact that most of us are lay men who earn our living at a normal job of work brings us into closer contact and fellowship with our audience than would apply if there was a ministerial bias amongst our number. I feel that we should at all costs maintain the laymen's [sic] point of view and avoid ministerial interference.'¹⁵ Innovation and independence of action, essential characteristics of his business activity, were features AGB prized in the YFC movement.

II

AGB's business experience contributed to his uncertainties about the question of whether Birmingham YFC should affiliate with British YFC, probably the major policy decision facing the Birmingham YFC in the post-war years. British YFC had been formed in spring 1947 at a meeting (held in Birmingham) of interested clergy and laymen who concurred with the evangelistic style of Billy Graham and Cliff Barrows. Its first chairman was the Reverend Thomas L. Livermore, Vicar of St John's Deptford, a Proctor in Convocation and a leading evangelical Anglican in the House of Clergy, in whose parish Graham and Barrows had conducted a mission in spring 1947.¹⁶ At Livermore's suggestion, (Alan) Eric Hutchings (1910-1982), an insurance company inspector from Manchester and a powerful preacher who had taken up evangelism in the 1920s, was appointed Field Director at £500 p.a., partly to conduct youth rallies, partly to develop the formation of local YFC groups.¹⁷

Those elected to the executive committee of British YFC included A. G. B. Owen, who soon discovered the weaknesses of the British YFC structure. Some American evangelists, invited over under the auspices of YFC International, came with dubious 'antecedents and abilities'.¹⁸ Among those who came to Britain in 1949 was Bob Jones Jr., president of the avowedly racist Bob Jones University.¹⁹ Finances were a more immediate concern to AGB. In short, they were in a mess. In May 1949 AGB wrote to Hutchings, observing that the latter's recent letter gave a false impression of the movement's financial position: Hutchings had ignored the existence of overheads. There were other problems: contrary to British YFC's expectations, American evangelists were not self-supporting; £100 donated by Lieutenant Colonel W. E. Shewell-Cooper, the horticulturalist (also an executive committee member), for supporting a YFC representative in France had been paid to visiting American evangelists who then transferred it to the American YFC; and another £100 claimed by the Americans for a Swiss conference was collected in Britain in violation of regulations against the export of sterling. 'I could not allow such things to exist in my own business', AGB crisply remarked.

He also objected to the implication in Hutchings' newsletter that 'we are going to send teams out because such teams will make a financial profit. Whilst I always want to see British Youth for Christ running its affairs in a businesslike way, I think in this comment you have rather overstepped the business outlook.' In short, AGB wanted to see business efficiency in the accounting and distribution of income, but severely discouraged religion for profit.²⁰ He decided that the only way to unravel British YFC's tangled accounts was to send in one of his own employees.

Hutchings knew he could not sort things out himself and on 30 June 1949 gladly

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informed the executive committee that Mr Davis [sic] of Rubery Owen & Co had visited in order to supervise the book-keeping of British YFC. W. H. Davies was in Rubery Owen & Co's 'Efficiency Systems Department': familiar with accounting and production, he was regularly despatched to any one of the other departments, or to subsidiaries, to find out why losses were being made, delivery dates not kept, and to report corrective measures directly to the chairman.²¹ Davies' long memo to AGB of 21 June outlined the simple method of book-keeping he had recommended to British YFC and enumerated their previous defects.²² Thereafter, until he left Rubery Owen & Co in the late 1950s, Davies was regularly assigned to examine and comment upon the accounts of British YFC.²³

The shaky state of British YFC's accounting procedures and the commercial objectives assembled by at least one of its officials were not the only aspects of the national organisation which perturbed A. G. B. Owen. To his mind, the British YFC did not operate on 'a fair and square basis', because affiliated rallies were unrepresented on the executive committee.²⁴ This particularly irked the Birmingham leaders because, as AGB told Hutchings a month later, 'it is my suggestion that our Constitution should line up very much more with, say, the Crusaders' Union than with a Missionary Society constitution', the latter relying on co-option of its executive committee, the former being much more democratic.²⁵ The belief that the Birmingham YFC was a much better run group than the national one was confirmed across transatlantic telephone lines by Billy Graham and Bob Cook who urged affiliation, with the Reverend Reg White (the FIEC minister) as full-time national officer responsible for the Midlands region.²⁶ After Shewell-Cooper complained to AGB of having a 'terribly hard' time when speaking at the Birmingham YFC rally in October 1949, and the non-affiliation of the Birmingham rally as 'ridiculous', AGB observed that the old problems of the national organisation still persisted. 'Our house [British YFC] financially is not in order ... and until this point is put right I very much doubt if you will get the unanimous decision for us in Birmingham to affiliate.'²⁷ British YFC expenditure, at up to £100 a week, considerably exceeded income and the movement still had no finance officer.²⁸ The stalemate between the two YFC bodies remained through the 1950s.

III

If AGB imposed balanced-budget accounting on those interdenominational movements he supported, his faith was tried when he stepped into the treasurer's shoes of the large-scale crusade. A foretaste of this, and a preparation for his role in the Greater London Crusade of 1954, came in Birmingham in 1951. Between 19th November and 5th December, Birmingham YFC sponsored 'the Hour of Decision Campaign', led by the Reverend Stephen F. Olford, an English Baptist evangelist.²⁹ In contrast to the Graham-Barrows Birmingham campaign of 1946, this one had the support of the leading clergy, like the Right Reverend J. H. Linton (Assistant Bishop of Birmingham), Canon Bryan Green, the Reverend Dr Maldwyn Edwards (Methodist Superintendent of Birmingham Central Mission and President of the Birmingham Free Church Federal Council), and the Reverend W. Russell Shearer (Chairman of the Birmingham District of the Methodist Church).³⁰ AGB, as honorary treasurer, faced a budget target variously estimated at £1300 or £1500 or more.³¹ In fact the seventeen-day campaign cost just over £1255.³² AGB's faith that Birmingham YFC supporters could fund a campaign of such a magnitude, based on the annual receipts from rallies (totalling £963 in 1949-50) and the regular attendances of 2000-2500 at those monthly rallies, was fully justified.³³ Receipts from the 1951 campaign totalled £1418, of which £588 came from collections, £101 from literature sales, £73 from

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collecting boxes and £615 from donations. AGB himself made a recorded donation of £100.³⁴ Apparently he did not appeal to fellow industrialists to lend their support.

He did, however, use some of his civic influence. He chaired a gathering of 72 leaders from the Birmingham churches held at Kunzles Café, Five Ways, on 9 April 1951, at which Canon Bryan Green made a supporting speech. AGB also wrote to the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, inviting him to attend the campaign and wondering whether he might reverse the City Transport Manager's decision to refuse Hour of Decision advertising on City buses ('for the reason that he does not consider the Campaign is of Civic importance'): to no effect, for it was the final decision of the City Transport Committee.³⁵ AGB's effective financial management of the Birmingham 'Hour of Decision Campaign' of 1951 led eighteen months later to the invitation to act in a similar capacity for the Greater London Crusade of 1954.

IV

Appraisal of the role of business figures in the temporal affairs of the churches is frequently neglected by historians and church leaders. Historians have shown a much stronger interest in clerical careers or ecclesiastical architecture. Church leaders have either assumed that people in business would provide uncritical support for church activities or else have seen thrusting business people as a threat to their own position. This has probably been more true of decentralised than of centralised denominations, more true of non-sacerdotal than of sacerdotal ones. At the beginning of the twentieth century men in business (few women outside the Society of Friends) provided an important reservoir of lay leadership and material resources for the Protestant denominations in Britain. By the 1950s entrepreneurial figures had significantly withdrawn from the lay leadership of the denominations, at a national level at least.³⁶ In part this may be explained by the spread of secularism, in part by the rise of centralised denominational organisations which took over from lay business people the administrative functions of church government.³⁷ In this situation it was hardly surprising that a number of the more energetic and able laymen in the churches, especially those with business backgrounds, found new opportunities for Christian service in interdenominational activities.³⁸ Here they were once more badly needed and here, again, the professional clergy were in a weak position relative to the laity. A. G. B. Owen's role in Birmingham YFC may be seen in this context.

While A. G. B. Owen was a rare example of a post-war business leader who publicly declared his Christian beliefs while operating in the structures of capitalism (John W. Laing and J. Arthur Rank were others), his position as a Christian working in capitalist industry was not at all uncommon. In these circumstances faith and work, Christianity and capitalism, had either to be wholly divorced or wholly related. In the twentieth century the latter was the more honest position. If that was to be pursued, then the Christian in business needed guidance in struggling with the conflicts between Christian standards and business practices. Scripture was A. G. B. Owen's major source for principles. He also sought and heeded counsel from the Right Reverend Edward S. Woods, the Bishop of Lichfield (1937-53).³⁹ What he could not do was to avail himself of the experience of past Christians in business and industry and see how Biblical principles had worked out in their lives: almost without exception they had been evaluated by their biographers in terms of their philanthropic, rather than their business, activities.⁴⁰ This article is an attempt to help redress the balance.

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NOTES

I am most grateful to members of the Owen family, especially Mr A. David Owen, Mrs Grace Jenkins, Mr Jim Owen and Lady Owen, for granting me access to the papers of Sir Alfred Owen and for answering numerous queries. Mr R. F. Trew and Mr William H. Day kindly supplied data on the members of the Birmingham YFC working committee. My thanks also go to John Briggs for his editorial comments.

1. See David J. Jeremy, 'Alfred George Beech Owen', in David J. Jeremy and Christine Shaw, eds., *Dictionary of Business Biography*, 6 vols., 1984-6; also David J. Jeremy, *Capitalists and Christians: Business Leaders and the Churches in Britain, 1900-1960*, Oxford 1990, *passim*.
2. J. C. Pollock, *Billy Graham: Highlights of the Story*, Basingstoke 1984, pp.31-7.
3. Author's interview with Lady Owen, 26 February 1985. The Barrows visited the Owen home in subsequent years and on one occasion AGB sent them Hercules bicycles. Rubery Owen Holdings Ltd., Darlaston, West Midlands, Sir Alfred Owen papers (hereafter ROA) 1949 B16, AGBO to Cliff Barrows, 22 January 1949.
4. Her second husband was Ansi Clarence Dixon (1854-1925) of Baltimore. See J. F. Crosfield, *A History of the Cadbury Family*, 2 vols., privately printed, 1985, I: 351-5; information from Mr W. H. Day, enclosed in letter to author from Mr R. F. Trew, 22 October 1986.
5. Information from Mr W. H. Day.
6. D. P. Thomson and D. Patterson, eds., *The Scottish Churches Handbook*, Edinburgh 1933, p.103; see also F. P. and M. S. Wood, *Youth Advancing: The Story of What God Has Done Through the National Young Life Campaign*, 1961.
7. ROA 1949-50 B16, YFC rally programmes.
8. *Ibid.*, B9, minutes of YFC Team, 11 October 1948.
9. *Ibid.*, 'Estimated Expenses of Rally', which includes £21 for 2000 programmes (sold at 6d each) including blocks; AGBO to E. M. Clayson, 2 May 1949.
10. *Ibid.*, 1949-50 B16, YFC rally programme, 28 May 1949.
11. Information from Mrs Grace Jenkins (daughter of Sir Alfred Owen), July 1986.
12. ROA 1949-50 B1.9, RFW's statement of December 1948, when it cost £90-£100 to stage a single rally, including £21 for programmes and £17 for the hire of the Town Hall.
13. See his book *The Practice of Evangelism*, 1951.
14. ROA 1949-50 B1.9, AGBO to the Lord Mayor of Birmingham 17, November 1948, 2 May 1949; AGBO to the Regional Petroleum Officer, 25 August 1948, 26 February 1949.
15. *Ibid.*, 'Malvern Retreat, Birmingham Youth for Christ', 22 April 1949.
16. *The Times* 7 September 1988; Pollock, *Billy Graham* 37.
17. ROA 1949-50 B1.9, circulated minutes of meeting of delegates held in Westminster Chapel, London, 31 March 1948. J. E. Tuck, *Your Master Proclaim: The Story of Eric Hutchings and His Team*, 1968; *Evangelism Today* no.127, October 1982. I am grateful to Mrs Audrey Jones of Spurgeon's College for help here.
18. ROA 1949-50 B1.9, circulated minutes of British YFC, 27 January 1949.
19. *ibid.*, British YFC newsletter No.5, 18 March 1949.
20. ROA 1949-50 B1.9, AGBO to Eric Hutchings, 19 May 1949.
21. ROA 1949 DA/4 for Davies' role in Rubery Owen & Co.
22. *Ibid.*, Davies to AGBO, 21 June 1949.
23. ROA 1954 DA/4, AGBO to Davies, 16, 17 April, 11 May, 6, 11 August, 25 October 1954.
24. ROA 1949-50 B1.9, AGBO to Eric Hutchings, 13 July 1949.
25. *Ibid.*, AGBO to Eric Hutchings, 11 August 1949.
26. ROA 1949 B1.1, AGBO's memo re affiliation, 11 July 1949.
27. *ibid.*, Shewell-Cooper to AGBO, 24 October 1949; AGBO to Shewell-Cooper, 21 November 1949.
28. *Ibid.*, AGBO to Eric Hutchings, 21 November 1949.
29. Born of missionary parents in Northern Rhodesia and converted in West Africa, Olford trained at St Luke's College, Mildmay, London, and in the late 1930s embarked on crusade preaching. During the war he preached in South Wales to troops and afterwards resumed crusade preaching in Canada and the USA. He served as minister of Duke Street Baptist Church, Richmond, 1953-59, and as minister of Calvary Baptist Church, New York, 1959-1983. He frequently appeared on the platform at the annual conventions at Keswick and Filey. Information from the Evangelical Library, London.
30. ROA 1951 B1.9, AGBO to the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, 8 November 1951.
31. ROA 1951 B1.9, Birmingham YFC Notes on Advisory Council for consideration of the Executive Team, attached to Team minutes of 8 January 1951; campaign minutes 21 May 1951.
32. £306 for the nightly hire of Birmingham Town Hall; £203 for secretarial expenses; £533 for printing and advertising; and £213 for 'meeting expenses' (which included a £60 fee to Stephen Olford). ROA 1952 B1.9, Birmingham YFC 'Hour of Decision Campaign' Financial Statement of 24 January 1952; ROA 1951 B1.9, Stephen F. Olford to AGBO, 12 December 1951.
33. *Ibid.*, Audited Birmingham YFC Financial Statements for the years ending 31 August 1950 and 31 August 1951; AGBO to Councillor Eric E. Mole, 2 March 1951.
34. ROA 1952 B1.9, 'Hour of Decision Campaign'

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- Financial Statement 24 January 1952.
35. ROA 1951 BI.9, AGBO to the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, 8 November 1951; Lord Mayor of Birmingham to AGBO, 12 November 1951.
36. See Jeremy, *Capitalists and Christians*, chaps.7-9.
37. David J. Jeremy, 'Important Questions about Business and Religion in Modern Britain', in David J. Jeremy ed., *Business and Religion in Britain*, Aldershot, 1988, pp.11-12.
38. Jeremy, *Capitalists and Christians*, chap.10.
39. *Ibid.*, chap.6.
40. R. H. Campbell, 'A Critique of the Christian Businessman and His Paternalism', in Jeremy, ed., *Business and Religion in Britain*.

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CHAPEL HISTORIES

Hilary Dunscombe, *Footprints of Faith: A History of Central Church, Swindon*, 1988, 142pp. £3.50 + £1.25 p&p, from Central Church, Victoria Road, Swindon, SN1 3AJ. Tel: 0793 37642.

E. K. H. Jordan, *The Church at the Hay Well: How Baptists came to Malvern*, 1987, 57pp. £2 + 30p p&p from Mrs D. H. Herbert, Flat 3, 68 Graham Road, Malvern, WR14 2HU.

Joan Warne, *A Branch of the Vine: The Story of Howlands Baptist Church, Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, 1964-1989*, 1989, 24pp. £1 from Mrs Warne, 26 Autumn Grove, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL7 4DB Tel: 0707 321778.

Footprints of Faith was published to mark the tenth anniversary of the formation of Swindon Central Church by the uniting of Baptist, Methodist and three United Reformed Congregations. The book is not intended to be a detailed record of the five churches which became the Central Church but is, in the words of the author, 'a collection of memories of great occasions, moments of crisis, memorable personalities, amusing events, and above all the way in which our varying faiths have grown together over the past hundred years'.

The Baptist cause in Swindon dates from the opening of the Great Western Railway works in the early eighteen forties. Baptists were among the new arrivals in the town and they walked across fields to Stratton Green for Sunday morning services and some of the hardier ones returned again at night by lantern light. Richard Breeze, minister of the Stratton Church, helped to start the Baptist church in New Swindon, preaching twice each Sunday in Swindon as well as at Stratton. The new church was viewed with suspicion and on several occasions the pastor and his flock were pelted with rotten fruit and eggs. However, by 1848 enough money had been collected to purchase a site in Fleet Street and a chapel, seating several hundred people, was opened the following year. Swindon's dramatic growth, however, attracted people from all over Britain including many Baptists from Wales who, with help from the Monmouthshire Baptist Association, built their own iron chapel and eventually a stone building, the Cambria Chapel, which is still standing today. Most Sundays Welsh preachers arrived by train to conduct the services, but by 1882 a new generation had grown up speaking English and the ageing congregation asked the Baptists at Fleet Street to take them over.

Evangelism had a high priority in the early days and each Sunday intrepid groups of worshippers from the Baptist Tabernacle would meet and walk several miles to conduct outdoor services or to provide the nucleus for regular mission services in halls all over the area. C. H. Spurgeon arrived one day - in heavy snow -