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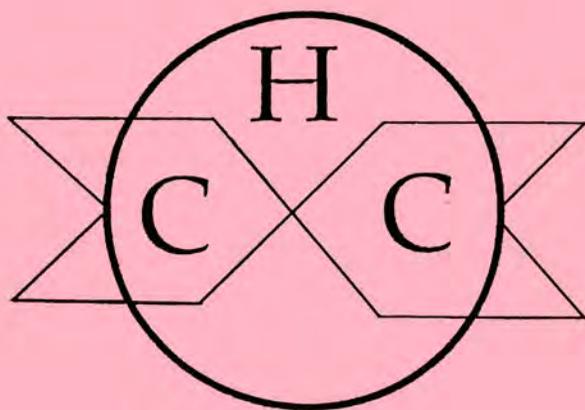
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A table of contents for the *Congregational History Society Magazine* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_congregational-history-circle-01.php

Congregational
History Circle
Magazine

Volume 4 Number 5



Spring 2003

The Congregational History Circle Magazine

Volume 4 No 5 Spring 2003

Contents

Editorial	314
News and Views	314
Chapel Tour in Perth	319
Elsie Chamberlain 1980-1991 by <i>Alan Argent</i>	321
A Church was Born: Old Coulsdon Congregational Church - the Early Years 1948-1958 by <i>Harold Cocks</i>	359
John Stoughton's Ms Autobiography at Dr Williams's Library by <i>Yvonne Evans</i>	374
Obituary	379
Reviews	381
Our Contemporaries	394

EDITORIAL

The years, during and after the Second World War, witnessed the dispersal of urban populations and the consequent further development of outer suburbs and dormitory towns. Such communities often found that the provision of churches was inadequate to their needs and Harold Cocks, whom we welcome to our pages, has addressed this aspect of Congregationalism's history as it affected the beginnings of his church at Old Coulsdon, a pleasant, leafy district, with a Congregational church of an unusual and distinctive design, south of London. In addition, Yvonne Evans has transcribed John Stoughton's revealing return to a nineteenth century enquirer about spiritual influences. Stoughton was a minister and writer of distinction who was able to reflect sensitively upon the formative impressions which helped frame his character and his faith.

With this magazine we come to the end of our journey through the life and work of Elsie Chamberlain. It has been a giddy ride! Yet I hope that it has been not only informative but helpful spiritually and morally, as she would have wished. Our Congregational forebears would have reminded themselves and us to "redeem the time". Elsie's story testifies to a life of almost ceaseless and fevered activity. Here is no chronicle of wasted time.

This issue also records the death of our former CHC member and contributor to this magazine, Alan Tovey, who was, at his death, the secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches. We are grateful to Dr Digby James for his writing an obituary of Alan for our pages.

NEWS AND VIEWS

The Church of the Pfalz

Jean Young has forwarded a request for help from Margaret Thompson of Westminster College, Cambridge. Mrs Thompson has noted that the 50th anniversary of the Covenant of 1957, between the Congregational Union of England and Wales and The Church of the Pfalz (the Palatinate), which recognised "table and pulpit fellowship", will occur soon. Links between these German churches and Congregational churches in this country developed first in the years following the Second World War. The United Reformed Church is planning to mark the occasion but faces the obvious problem of assembling material and people at this distance in time. Mrs Thompson wonders whether any Congregational churches and/or individuals

recall contacts with friends in The Church of the Pfalz. She would like to be put in touch with anyone who may help and she may be contacted at Westminster College, Madingley Road, Cambridge, CB2 0AA or mt212@cam.ac.uk.

International Congregational Journal

The latest copy of the journal (vol 3, no 1, February 2003) contains articles of interest to our readers. In particular, Robert Pope of the University of Wales, Bangor, has contributed an illuminating paper on “ ‘A Giant of Welsh Protestantism’: R Tudur Jones and Congregationalism in Wales”. Tudur was a fine Christian, a loyal Welsh Independent and an historian whose judgments were scrupulously fair. He was also an important supporter of his fellow Welshman, Reginald Cleaves, in setting up the Congregational Federation and he was a CHC member. Tudur’s writings were mostly published in Welsh and, at present, some of his former colleagues at Bangor are preparing translations of some of his most important works in English. The journal also contains articles on other twentieth century Congregationalists, John de Gruchy of South Africa, Harry Butman of the USA, and Elsie Chamberlain (reproducing material which first appeared in this magazine), as well as a paper on Thomas Hooker, the influential New England minister.

UK National Inventory of War Memorials

This was initiated in 1989 under the auspices of the Imperial War Museum, in order to foster knowledge and awareness of memorials and those commemorated. The definition of a war memorial includes any physical object in the UK, commemorating a conflict or person(s) involved in a conflict, but excluding the grave of such a person. The data so far collected include information on such diverse items as bus shelters; memorial tablets on walls (sometimes to an individual); municipal and national memorials; and even gravestones which have an inscription commemorating someone not buried there. As well as the computerised data, an archive of photographs and original documentation is kept. The keepers of the inventory would like to receive any data concerning memorials from volunteers and have devised a form to facilitate this. In addition to the nature and location of memorials they are keen to receive background information about how the memorial came to be erected, its cost and maker, newspaper reports of unveiling ceremonies etc. The database and archives are available for consultation by appointment only, although it is hoped to make the

database accessible through the worldwide web. They can be contacted at: Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London, SE1 6HZ or email books@iwm.org.uk.

Date for the Diary

The annual commemoration of those Nonconformist clergy who were ejected from their livings after the restoration of King Charles II, and the subsequent ecclesiastical settlement, will take place on 16th August 2003. The venue has yet to be arranged but details will be available nearer the time from Christine Denwood on 020 8944 7685.

Daniel T Jenkins (1914-2002)

The death of the Welsh theologian, Daniel Thomas Jenkins, in June 2002 deserves to be noted by readers of this magazine. His ministry was characterised by a loyalty to his vocation to serve the local church, as well as by a desire to pursue serious academic studies. He was a keen proponent of Barthian theology and an advocate of ecumenism, both in this country and in the USA, where he taught at Chicago University and later at Princeton Theological Seminary. Most unusually he was minister of the Congregational church at Oxted in Surrey and held at the same time the post at Chicago. He had earlier been minister at the Vineyard, Richmond-upon-Thames, where among the regular worshippers were Harold and Mary Wilson. Jenkins always felt a great concern for city centre ministry (especially in London) and served, not only as minister of the King's Weigh House in Mayfair 1956-62, but in the 1970s as minister of Regent Square United Reformed Church. In the 1960s he had been chaplain and reader in religious studies at Sussex University. While at Regent Square he became chaplain to the 1662 Society, leading study groups, weekend retreats and lecturing on dogmatic theology. Just as he had been critical of the Congregational Union as a young minister, so also in his later years he was unhappy with the URC's stance on ecumenism. Although he joined the URC, he saw its witness to church unity as narrow and exclusive, thereby disconcerting the imaginative and unconventional. His several books explore Christian involvement in contemporary society.

Aubrey Lewis (1917-2002)

Born in Caerphilly in south Wales, Aubrey David Lewis was a distinguished missionary who served through the London Missionary Society, going to South Africa, with his family, just after the Second World

War. In 1945 he became the principal of Tiger Kloof, in the Orange Free State, which was one of the leading schools in the country. For ten years he brought the vigour and enthusiasm of youth to his work. Notable for its educating African teachers and preachers, Tiger Kloof came into conflict with the National Party after it had formed the government in 1948 and, in particular, with its policy of apartheid. The government sought to remove black education from the missionary societies and to place it under direct political control. Having consulted Lewis, the LMS closed Tiger Kloof in 1955, after 51 years of service to education in South Africa. Forty years later, in October 1995, Lewis laid the rededication stone at Tiger Kloof, with Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

After leaving South Africa, Lewis was appointed assistant headmaster of Premph College, Kumasi, in Ghana, where among his students was John Kufuor, now the president. From 1961 he combined work in the local education office in Huddersfield with the ministry of Norristhorpe Congregational Church. In 1966 he became a schools inspector in Greenwich, London and, in retirement, lived in Suffolk, serving for two years as interim moderator of Tacket Street United Reformed Church, Ipswich.

Our CHC secretary, Colin Price, has written enthusiastically of **The Axminster Ecclesiastica - The Axminster Independent Church 1660-1698**, edited by K W H Howard, published by Mayflower Christian Books, 114 Spring Rd, Southampton, Hants, SO19 2QB, www.mcbs.clara.net. (£9.99).

‘Please don’t be put off by the title! - the publishers obviously think you might be, as it is also sold under the more friendly title, After the Puritans. This is a real gem, indeed, a gold nugget compared to most chapel histories. In 1687 this Devon Independent church decided to compile a Book of Remembrance, recording the turbulent times in the church’s life, since it was gathered in 1660. “The works of God are all worthy to be remembered, but especially His work in building and preserving His churches”. The first minister was Bartholomew Ashwood, the incumbent of Axminster parish church, soon to be ejected and sent to the “common gaol” in Exeter. But “Forseeing clouds to gather blackness over these nations ... endeavoured to incorporate themselves into one body before the storm did fall”. They numbered but thirteen or so and met secretly, sometimes for “the sacred ordinance of the Lord’s Supper in a lonesome place near a great wood”. Once in 1663, during a sermon on the text, “Keep me as the apple of the eye: hide

me under the shadow of Thy wings” (Psalm 17:8), the Lord did indeed keep them as soldiers scoured the woods.

By 1664 “the persecution waxed hotter” as new laws forbade the convening “together above the number four to worship God contrary to the national way of worship” (i.e. the Anglican Book of Common Prayer). In 1685 the church was caught up in the ill-fated rising of the Duke of Monmouth whose forces marched *en route* through Axminster. Two church members died in the ensuing battle of Sedgemoor. After the rout and in the swift reprisals which followed, John Ashwood, son of the pastor, was sentenced to die as a traitor by the infamous Judge Jeffreys, who also appointed a place of execution. He was eventually reprieved. Thomas Smith, also of the church, was likewise sentenced to death but died later, after escaping from gaol: “so exchanging this troublesome life for those mansions of rest and peace..in glory”. John Spiring was sentenced to banishment and sold as a slave in Barbados. “After a time the door was open for redemption by paying a sum of money” which the church gladly raised. But alas on the return his ship was lost and he was drowned.

The fellowship variously worshipped near Cloakham Wood, by magistrate’s licence under the Declaration of Indulgence (1672), at nearby Weycroft Manor, in “a cave”, back to Weycroft Manor, until eventually in 1698, a meeting house in Axminster was opened. It is inspirational to read these accounts, not as history, but as contemporary recordings of events. Bartholomew Ashwood died in 1678. Stephen Towgood was ordained pastor in 1679. His brother Matthew MD was appointed elder in 1693. John Ashwood was appointed pastor in Exeter, in 1689 and in 1698 removed to London where he died in 1706. Bartholomew Ashwood’s widow survived to 1709.

The Axminster Ecclesiastica is by no means unknown. It was first transcribed and published in 1874. This edition (1976, with reprints) contains historical notes on the various Acts comprising the Clarendon Code, the Act of Uniformity (1662), the Conventicle Act (1664) and the Five Mile Act (1665), which inhibited Axminster dissenters as they valiantly maintained their worship. Included as well are engravings of places mentioned and maps of the area and routes of both the Duke of Monmouth’s campaign and that of William of Orange in 1688, both of which went through Axminster. This, together with copious notes on church doctrine and Congregational beliefs on the church, makes for an excellent read.’

Free Church Music

Readers of this magazine will be pleased to know of the publication of Four centuries of music in the Free Churches (Congregational Federation Savoy Papers no. 7) by Derek Watson, one of our CHC members. They will be familiar with Derek Watson's articles for the Magazine about Catholic contributions to free church hymnody. Having commenced with the music of Puritan worship and the expansion of hymnody in the eighteenth century, the third and fourth chapters of this book revisit the subject of those articles whilst concentrating on the music. He follows on with the music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A separate chapter deals with the use of choirs including the Nonconformist use of the 'Anglican' chant. An appendix gives useful advice to musicians tasked with accompanying hymns.

An interesting issue is raised with the discussion of the influence of popular music on churches. He states that the compilers of Youth Praise (1966 & 1969), published in the era of the Beatles, admit to being influenced by the dance band music of Victor Sylvester, whose heyday was in the thirties and forties. This reveals the innate conservatism of church music. Discussions with my non-churchgoing friends show that their favourite hymns are almost always traditional old favourites. A similar trend might be revealed by the use of the chorus in adult worship. Originally promoted, as Watson tells us, by Children's Special Service Mission Choruses (1921, 1938 & 1959) for Sunday Schools they came to be in demand from adults. One can infer from this that the religion learned in childhood had included choruses and they felt it should continue to do so in adulthood.

CHAPEL TOUR IN PERTH

On Friday, 10th May 2002 a select group of Congregational History Circle members met at Perth, about sixty-five miles from Glasgow, the venue for the following day's Congregational Federation May meetings. Setting out from the Congregational Church, they first visited the medieval (Church of Scotland) parish church where the reformer John Knox had preached. The most immediate result of his preaching against idolatry was the smashing of the stained glass windows there and at the monastery on the fringes of town. Until they were replaced, the building became ruinous due to the weather's encroachments. An interesting part of the church's history was that from the Reformation until the 1920s it was physically divided into three parish churches - East Kirk, Middle Kirk and West Kirk.

The group then learned about the history of Perth Congregational Church from Rev Alan Gibbon, its then minister. Walking around the town, they saw the various locations in Perth where it had previously worshipped since the 1790s. This included the Evangelical Union church, founded in 1855, which joined the Congregational in 1896 and moved to the present building, constructed for them, in 1899. A talk was also given by Dr William McNaughton relating the stories of a number of notable Scottish Congregationalists. CHC members returned to Glasgow by way of Stirling where they had an evening meal and walked around the ancient part of the town, stretching down from the castle.

On Saturday 11th May they went to Queen's Park Baptist Church, Glasgow for the Congregational Federation May assembly. The business of the day passed relatively smoothly, and included the welcoming of new churches and of newly qualified ministers and pastors. Felicity Cleaves was inducted as president for the coming year. She gave an address entitled Uniteddiversity.org in which she suggested that Congregationalists, believing in unity in diversity, had much to offer, in reflecting upon this principle, to society as a whole, as well as challenging themselves to take unity in diversity seriously in their own churches. After the assembly, our resourceful CHC members drove home, changing driver about every two hours, arriving shortly after midnight in London. They were in church on Sunday morning!

Ian Black

ELSIE CHAMBERLAIN 1980-1991

Going West¹

In 1980 Elsie Chamberlain, at the age of 70, began two new ministries in the west of England. The first was at the Congregational chapel at Chulmleigh, in Devon and the second at North Street Congregational Church, Taunton, in Somerset. The two churches are situated over forty miles apart and this unusual pastorate required Elsie to make the journey between them at least twice a week, because she intended to spend half her time with one church and half with the other. Taunton is an historic town, with a castle dating from the 12th and 13th centuries, which is noted as the site of the 'Bloody Assizes' of Judge Jeffreys, following the failure of the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion of 1685, after which many of his supporters were condemned to death. Chulmleigh is an old market town, situated on the hills of north Devon, with a parish church dating from the 15th century. Despite their obviously attractive settings, these churches offered Elsie no soft options in her later years. She certainly did not regard herself as settling down to a comfortable sinecure by which, in exchange for her stipend, she undertook the minimum of duties in two idyllic rural backwaters.

Indeed, if Chulmleigh might perhaps be seen as a tiny Nonconformist community in a small country settlement, superficially seeming to demand little from her, Taunton's needs were clearly greater. Taunton is a busy county town, prone to traffic jams, with its fair share of the usual problems found in any comparably sized commercial community - unemployment, restless youth, a sense of hopelessness, the poor, the elderly and lonely etc. Elsie may have felt that both churches had settled down too much, that they were stuck in a rut and needed positive ideas and effective change. Of course, Elsie was not seeking a retreat although her husband had only died two years before, in January 1978, and his loss remained a bitter blow. Rather she thrived on challenge and she saw these churches as needing her own kind of revival. She intended to shake them up a bit, to make waves and to help them to grow. That is what she had always done. She could promise

¹ I should like to thank the following for help with the research for this article - Graham M Adams, Ray Avent, Owen Butler, John Carpenter, Vincent and Jan Carrington, Richard Cleaves, Christopher Damp, John Hibbs, Avril and Roy Lowes, Elaine Marsh, Deborah Martin, Colin and Val Price, Geoffrey Roper, Joyce Sampson, Joan Taylor, John Wilcox, Janet Wootton and Peter Young.

the church members excitement and stimulation but not rest.

Elsie's previous ministerial experience had been chiefly in urban or commuter settings - at Friern Barnet, Richmond-upon-Thames, The City Temple and Kentish Town in London, and at Hutton in Essex. She had also been a pioneer as the first woman chaplain in the RAF, and had gained celebrity in her work for the BBC in its religious broadcasting department. Truth to tell in 1980 Elsie was still actively involved with the Congregational church at Kentish Town, in north London, where she had played a pivotal role in rescuing the church from its widely predicted closure since 1979, and she continued that involvement until, at least, May 1981 when she was back again in north London, chairing the church meeting there.² She was essentially a Londoner, born and bred, at ease in the big city, and she enjoyed responding to the unceasing and urgent demands of the capital. However it would be foolish to infer that before 1980 Elsie knew little about the west country. She had, after all, been visiting the area at regular intervals as she and her husband had owned a house, overlooking Kit Hill, near Callington in Cornwall, north west of Plymouth, for several years and, although Elsie clearly felt a call to the two churches, her fondness for and knowledge of Somerset and Devon must have weighed in her decision to go west.

In 1980 Elsie was also much involved in work for the Congregational Federation nationally. She was still the chairman of the CF's council and in addition she was the CF's officer for ecumenical relationships. She was also deeply affected by the death of Reginald Cleaves in hospital in Leicester in July that year. He had been the prime mover behind the CF and its predecessor, the Congregational Association, and, although he had been unwell for some time, his death was largely unexpected and removed his quiet strength and wisdom from the resources available to her and her CF colleagues. In the following spring Elsie would launch a memorial fund for Cleaves, to provide a suitable memorial for him at the new Congregational Centre in Nottingham.³

The Move to the West

² Kentish Town Congregational Church Meeting Minutes - 7 May 1981. I have covered in detail her involvement at Kentish Town in a previous article in this magazine.

³ Congregational News (Sept - Oct 1980) 1, (July - August 1981) 4. A portrait of Reginald Cleaves by Roy Porter was later unveiled at the CF base in Nottingham.

Elsie's move to the west country was the result of a series of decisions in the summer of 1980. The minister of North Street since April 1974 had been Gerald Gossage, at whose induction service Elsie had herself presided. After five and a half years he had resigned his pastorate there and had moved to become the minister of Hanham Road Congregational Church, Kingswood, Bristol in September 1979. After learning that she was seeking a pastorate, on 24 July 1980 the deacons of North Street decided to invite Elsie to preach, with a view to her becoming their minister and, one week later, the church meeting unanimously endorsed this invitation. On 27 August it was reported that Elsie had replied, accepting the invitation. She had by then already agreed to be the part-time minister of Chulmleigh Congregational Church where she succeeded a series of pastors who from 1970 to 1979 had given only oversight to the church. She had also had first hand experience of the church at Chulmleigh because she had first preached there in 1958 when it was without a minister. Therefore, if appointed at Taunton, she would be absent from the town for part of each week. Elsie had also explained to the North Street deacons that she would not wish to live in the manse alone and had asked them if she might offer accommodation to another person. She cared no more for being alone than she did for being idle. She stated frankly that she would see her appointment at Taunton as "caretaking" and as "comparatively short term". On the same day the deacons' meeting at Chulmleigh Congregational Church learned that Elsie had offered to live in the manse there and conduct services at the church during the winter months.⁴

Initially then it appears that Elsie may not have intended to stay very long in either of these two churches. A one year pastorate was mentioned in October at Taunton and in 1988 she wrote of having initially offered six months' service to Chulmleigh. As it transpired, she would remain at

⁴ Congregational News (July - August 1974) 14, (Jan - Feb 1980) 15, L Fisher History of Chulmleigh Congregational Church (Chulmleigh 1997) 10, North St Congregational Church Meeting Minutes Book 1966-83 - 31 July 1980, Deacons Meeting Minutes Book 1972-80 - 24 July, 27 August, 1980, Chulmleigh Congregational Church Deacons Meeting Minutes Book 1969-83 - 27 August 1980. The minutes books are all retained at the churches mentioned (hereafter after the first mention of a minutes book, "Church Meeting Minutes Book" is abbreviated to "Church Minutes" and "Deacons Meeting Minutes Book" is abbreviated to "Deacons Minutes"). I am grateful to the ministers, deacons and members of these churches for their enabling me to consult their records and also to learn from their memories.

Chulmleigh as minister for nearly three years (although she was a significant presence there for many more years) and at North Street for six, far longer than she had originally intended, but how could she really have set a date for her departure at that early stage? Until she had begun her ministry in these two places she would not really have understood the problems nor known how best she might tackle them. Only after having become acquainted with the people and their needs and talents, could she have set some realistic targets for her work.

On 23 October 1980 the North Street deacons passed a proposal to offer Elsie a part-time ministry at their church. One deacon abstained. The church meeting discussed this recommendation from the deacons later that same evening. If appointed, she was to have half the minister's stipend plus expenses (a total of approximately £2000 per annum). She expected to conduct morning worship each Sunday and evening worship and communion on the third Sunday of each month. She would normally be in Chulmleigh on Sunday evenings and on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Then she would travel to Taunton to spend Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sunday mornings there. The appointment was expected to be for about a year and it would start in December. Thirty-one church members voted for Elsie to be their minister on these terms, three were against the motion and, again as at the deacons meeting, one abstained.⁵

Before 1972 Taunton had other Congregational churches besides North Street but Paul's Meeting and Bishop's Hull, each proudly dating their foundations to 1662, had chosen to join the new United Reformed Church. North Street had originally been formed in 1843 by a secession from Paul's Meeting but had enjoyed friendly contacts with its parent church and other local Congregationalists for many years. They had joined together in founding Taunton School, in the mid-nineteenth century, and, after 1972, the ministers of these churches sought to maintain good relations.

Chulmleigh

In the summer of 1980 Ted and Mary Wilson, personal members of the Congregational Federation, from Solihull in the English west midlands, paid their first visit to the Congregational church at Chulmleigh on a Sunday and found that the town "was at tea". Although there was "not a soul about", they reported, "the place did not feel deserted". They were "delighted" with it and momentarily thought that they had been transported back in time to the

⁵ North St Deacons Minutes - 23 Oct 1980, Church Minutes - 23 Oct 1980.

1920s when some places they had known in Warwickshire and Worcestershire had been “like that, particularly on Sundays”. To the Wilsons, on this visit, Chulmleigh was “forever England”.

They were directed to the Congregational chapel and, finding that they were early but the door was open, they entered. Inside they sensed the atmosphere of this small but ancient building, decorated with heraldic designs, representing “the man who gave the land”, John Bowring, a local merchant, and “the man who built the chapel”, Lewis Stucley. They admired the minstrels’ gallery, the antique Bible box, the fine pulpit with its effective sounding board, and the white dove, seemingly “lost in the clouds”. In these prayerful surroundings, they were impressed by the ease with which they were able to sit quietly and “consider him”. They found the chapel “splendidly maintained” and “clean”, with its brass shining, having “the patina of age” but with “no trace of mustiness” and concluded that it was “greatly loved”. The Wilsons felt blessed by their experience and nominated the chapel at Chulmleigh as a place of pilgrimage for modern Congregationalists.⁶

The Congregational church at Chulmleigh has long claimed that it was founded as early as 1633 (some nine years before the English Civil War allowed the Independents to gather their churches openly and almost thirty years before the Great Ejection of 1662), a claim which Elsie herself also made, although this early date has been disputed. Lewis Stucley was a notable Devon Congregationalist who was ejected from his living in Exeter in 1662 and who preached in several places in the county until his death in 1687. His link to Chulmleigh may then be genuine but the Congregational historian, T G Crippen, noted in the 1920s that John Moore of Tiverton gave ten shillings to the building of the meeting place at “Chimleigh” in 1710. More recently Charles Surman questioned why licences were issued to meeting places, in the houses of John Bowring and Digory Cock (another local Dissenter), in 1672, if there was already an existing place of worship in the town. Surman concluded that the claim for a foundation of the church in 1633 was “very doubtful”. Recent local researchers have suggested 1662 as a probable foundation date. The present chapel dates from the early eighteenth century, probably from 1710, but admittedly is resonant with antiquity and must have accorded admirably with the simple dignified worship of the Dissenters who met there.⁷

⁶ Congregational News (September - October 1980) 4-5.

⁷ J G Cording A Short History of the Congregational Church, Chulmleigh.

Elsie herself felt something of the same sentiment as the Wilsons, describing it in 1988 as “The lovely old chapel at Chulmleigh”. She stated then that she had originally offered her ministry to the church members there for six months and that she had “always been an espouser of problem churches”. She explained further that she did not “believe in churches closing down and buildings being sold. It looks like a lack of faith in the future.” As a result “several times”, she continued, she had intervened “to bring a little weight to bear on the side of renewal”.⁸ In 1981 she had spoken with conviction of the need of the village churches in Devon which on Sundays, she stated, were “mostly preached to by Plymouth Brethren ... and it’s not quite Congregationalism, believe you me!”⁹ It seems, therefore, that Chulmleigh and other churches which she had served in her latter years, but probably not North Street, Taunton and Hutton, should be understood as Elsie’s renewal projects. Certainly Kentish Town should be seen in that light and she was to identify several others during her foray into the west country. Having consciously and resolutely set her hands to the plough Elsie would not look back.

Early Days in Somerset and Devon

Elsie was present at the deacons’ meeting at Chulmleigh on 12 November, 1980 and made the suggestion that she should hold a ‘speakers class’, in order to encourage people to “talk up the church” and also to attract more people to attend the Sunday services. She had held similar classes at Hutton during her ministry there and had used them to encourage participants to gain confidence in public speaking. At Hutton these classes had proved both popular and amusing. In January 1981 Elsie announced that she would be holding speakers classes twice monthly at North Street, Taunton also. The

Devon (Chulmleigh 1933) 7, H Holland A Short History of Chulmleigh Congregational Church Devon 1633-1983 (Chulmleigh 1983) preface, 1, T G Crippen ‘John Moore of Tiverton’ in Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society (1924-26) IX, 186, L Fisher’s “Chulmleigh - A Memorandum on the dating of the Chapel” is kept at the chapel. See also Surman’s ms note on the flyleaf of Cording’s history in Dr Williams’s Library, London. For Stucley see A G Matthews Calamy Revised (Oxford 1934) 469.

⁸ J Hibbs The Country Chapel (1988) 9.

⁹ The Bangor Challenge. International Congregational Fellowship Record of Proceedings (Los Angeles USA) 28.

deacons at Chulmleigh noted that the local Comprehensive College was to have a carol service on December 19 in the church.¹⁰ Elsie was beginning to make her presence felt in the community. At Taunton the induction and service of welcome for the new minister at North Street was held on Saturday, December 6, 1980.¹¹

Elsie was determined that her two churches should make a greater impact. North Street Congregational Church is set back from the road, partially hidden by the buildings to the front, although it is situated in a busy shopping area at the hub of the town. It is, therefore, possible for the thousands who pass every day to walk by the church's entrance without noticing it. Elsie decided that the church needed to have a more visible presence. Consequently she would often stand where the path leading to the church buildings met the pavement, in her ministerial garb, to engage in friendly chatter with Taunton's passing population. By February 1981 a new notice board had been erected outside North Street and leaflets had been printed for distribution by recruits from the congregation. A box, to carry leaflets detailing the church's activities and encouraging enquiries, was to be fixed to the church gate so that passers by could help themselves to these. Also in February Elsie began her practice at the church meetings of airing what she called the minister's concern. That month she brought the church members' attention to the fact that not all the members were present at Sunday worship. She appealed for those with their own transport to offer lifts to those without cars.¹²

At Chulmleigh in March 1981 Elsie was settling into the manse, busily decorating the bedrooms. Characteristically she also had plans to develop the musical side of the church's life and invited all those with instruments to form "an instrumental party". Later she would hold "an instrument evening once a fortnight" and she formed a choir to practise singing hymns on Monday evenings. Her encouragement of music in the town also included her giving violin lessons to the children. In her entry in Who's Who Elsie listed only one recreation, music. She announced that she intended that the church should hold services during Holy Week, a departure from tradition for

¹⁰ Chulmleigh Deacons Minutes - 12 Nov 1980, North St Church Minutes - 29 Jan 1981.

¹¹ North St Deacons Minutes - 20 Nov 1980, Congregational News (March - April 1981) 4.

¹² North St Deacons Minutes 1981-94 - 12 Feb, 26 Feb 1981.

rural Nonconformists in Devon!¹³

The annual general meeting at North Street in March 1981 noted that the church members shared a feeling of confidence in the future although, one month later, Elsie informed the deacons that “more enthusiasm” was required from them. They discussed the possible removal of some pews from the rear of the church to make room for serving coffee and for the greeting of “new friends”. That same day the minister’s concern at the church meeting was how best such newcomers might be welcomed. On the recommendation of the deacons, the meeting agreed to move forward the time of the morning services in the summer months from 11 to 10 am and also to serve coffee at the rear of the church after the service. The early start began in May on a three months’ trial. It was explained that worshippers were enabled to enjoy a cup of coffee for fifteen minutes and could become better acquainted with each other. Afterwards, if desired, they still would have time for a day out with their families. In June the church meeting minutes record that the 10 am start had been well received and that “a good number” had stayed for the coffee. However more volunteers were wanted to offer lifts in their cars and teachers were needed in the Sunday School - a sure sign that the children’s work was progressing.¹⁴

Steady Progress

In the summer of 1981 Elsie responded to an enquiring Congregationalist who had complained that he knew very little of any ecumenical ventures involving churches in the Congregational Federation. She stated that her Chulmleigh church had “a permanent two-way arrangement” with the local Methodists, in which the Congregationalists united with the Methodists for the Sunday morning service and, in their turn, the Methodists joined the Congregationalists on a Sunday evening. Whatever the ecumenical merits of this scheme may have been, it did mean, of course, that Elsie who would be present in Chulmleigh on a Sunday evening but not in the morning, would always be preaching to a united congregation, and also perhaps to a fuller one. She continued to explain that on Good Friday, 1981 over forty members of “a gathered choir” sang part of Handel’s Messiah at the Congregational chapel and repeated their performance at the parish

¹³ Chulmleigh Deacons Minutes - 22 March, 7 Sept 1981, Who Was Who 1991-1995 91-92.

¹⁴ North St Church Minutes - 25 March, 23 April, 28 May, 25 June 1981, Deacons Minutes - 23 April 1981.

church on Easter Day. She confessed that she herself had been the conductor. We may be in no doubt that she had also been the moving spirit behind this musical venture.

She also commented on one interesting development at “her Taunton church”. Here she had gathered four ministerial volunteers - Baptist, Church of England, Roman Catholic and United Reformed Church - to share in a “Spouters’ Corner” which took place on the forecourt of the Congregational church.¹⁵ She did not state how successful this had been although it does not appear to have been repeated.

By September 1981 North Street’s deacons had decided that the provision of coffee on a Sunday morning had proved worthwhile and they also felt that the earlier time for the morning service had been justified, so much so that they recommended that the time remain at 10 am throughout the coming winter. In addition, they commented favourably on the keeping of children in the church for the whole of the service. Contrary to fears, the children had behaved well. The church members later that month heard from the minister that the church needed to be “a family” which should “open its arms and have love to spare”. In her view the Taunton church needed “prayer, love and a readiness to try new approaches”. Only then would it have a future but, without these gifts, she maintained that it had nothing to look forward to. Had she met resistance to her initiatives for positive change? The members recognised that Elsie had brought vitality and stimulation to the church and in October 1981 they remarked upon the success of the children’s work, reflected in the “Amazing growth of the Sunday Club”. They noted as well that in December the church would have reached a “landmark” as Elsie would have been their minister for a year.¹⁶ In January 1982 Elsie shared her ‘minister’s concern’ with the Taunton church meeting, asking that members might consider encouraging their friends and neighbours who do not attend any place of worship to come with them to North Street.¹⁷

Henstridge

In late April 1982 she reported to the church that she had organised a party of volunteers to attempt “to uplift” the Congregational church at

¹⁵ Congregational News (Sept - Oct 1981) 7-8.

¹⁶ North St Deacons Minutes - 10 Sept 1981, Church Minutes - 24 Sept, 22 Oct.

¹⁷ North St Church Minutes - 28 Jan 1982.

Henstridge, a village also in Somerset, some forty miles from Taunton. This "Spring-cleaning" at Henstridge had actually occurred only a few days before the North Street church meeting and it was explained that the Henstridge church needed help because it consisted of only one church member and thirty children. In her earlier appeal, Elsie had asked for volunteers to visit Henstridge people in their homes and also to clean the church buildings. She had stated that the Congregational church there was the only Free church in the village. "We shall visit everyone to see who is interested", she announced, "and then clean the church and hall and hold a family rally on Sunday morning". Those who offered their help were told that they needed "a sleeping-bag, a scrubbing-brush and the joy of the Lord".¹⁸ The first two were clearly required for physical needs and the latter was essential for conveying Christian good news, through the distribution of pamphlets and personal visits, to the villagers.

The spring-cleaning at Henstridge resulted in 52 people attending a general meeting on the Wednesday and in an encouraging 49 coming to the morning worship there on the following Sunday. In July 1982 the news from Henstridge was still described as "heartening" although the official statistics do not reflect that optimism. The official returns for 1981-2 state that the church at Henstridge had 5 members, 4 adherents and 16 children and that only one service was held each month, at 2.45 pm on a Sunday afternoon. In 1983 the figures indicate no change in these categories although the word "closed" follows the church's name in the year book and no service details are recorded. In 1984 the returns indicate only 2 members, 8 adherents and 20 children, with a weekly service on Sunday at 11.00 am, but now Ronald Stockley was noted as the pastor. Stockley, who had been the pastor at the Congregational Church at Stalbridge, near Sturminster Newton, in Dorset since 1980, later was described as having settled at Henstridge in 1982. He was still there in 1986 when he had acquired Geoffrey Trimby as the assistant pastor. That year the returns still state only 2 members (presumably in addition to the two pastors) but the numbers of children have increased to 30. In 1990-1 the membership had halved to one and, in the following year, G Davies was the pastor but the church then had no members (although it still served 20 children). In 1994 the church at Henstridge ceased to appear in the Congregational Year Book.¹⁹ Elsie's valiant efforts at Henstridge appear not

¹⁸ Congregational News (March - April 1982) 3, North St Church Minutes - 22 April 1982.

¹⁹ Congregational Year Book (CYB)(1981-2) 92, (1983) 96, (1984) 94,

to have had the results she desired in the long term but should she not have made them? In every case local factors, as well as national trends, have their impact.

Elsie's desire to save not "lost causes" but "problem churches", as she called them, was also revealed at this time in her concern for the Congregational church at Stawell, near Bridgwater, in Somerset, and for her involvement with the re-opened church at Pennymoor, Poughill, near Tiverton, in Devon. In May 1982 Elsie expressed her gratitude for "the large gathering" at Pennymoor which gave encouragement to all those who had worked hard to re-open the building for regular worship.²⁰

Developments at Chulmleigh

In the spring of 1982, Elsie happened upon an original way of supplementing the restoration fund at Chulmleigh. Somewhat sacrificially she decided to offer accommodation in her manse there to visitors whom she described as "do it yourself ones", by which she presumably meant self-catering visitors, at £7 per person per week. She also commented that Chulmleigh was an "excellent spot" for a retired minister or a lay pastor "with plenty of enthusiasm", thus, by praising its virtues, she cast her net wide to catch a potential successor. She stated that the church had one Sunday service at 6 pm, as well as a family service, and that the congregation had trebled during the past year. A Sunday afternoon school was planned to begin in the coming February. The church also boasted an "orchestra" and a choir for "special music" which, she proudly stated, had performed Handel's Messiah last Easter and was then preparing Stainer's Crucifixion for Easter that year.²¹

In October 1982 Elsie told her deacons at Chulmleigh that she intended to leave the church in the following year but that she had good hopes of finding them a new and suitable minister to succeed her. In November she asked her Taunton church members to give support to Chulmleigh during its 350th anniversary celebrations, planned for 1983. She was hoping then to attract Cliff Richard to come to Chulmleigh to sing but, if he was not able to accept, then the choir would at least perform The Messiah in July 1983. In

(1985) 98, (1985-6) 60, (1986-7) 60, (1987-8) 60, 61, (1988-9) 62, (1989-90) 63, (1990-91) 61, (1991-2) 64.

²⁰ Congregational News (Sept - Oct 1980) 19, North St Church Minutes - 22 April 1982, Hibbs loc cit.

²¹ Congregational News (March - April 1982) 3.

February 1983 Elsie told the deacons at Chulmleigh that she expected to leave them in August that year but that Elaine Marsh, a respected and experienced Congregational minister from Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States of America, would be coming to take her place. Initially Elaine had been asked to come for two years but had committed herself to only one year at Chulmleigh. The contrast for Elaine could hardly have been greater, moving from a church in Minneapolis of 2,000 members to a small Devon chapel.²²

Not Quite Leaving Chulmleigh - A Constant Good Friend

Elsie did not easily relinquish her pastoral concern for the folk at Chulmleigh. On leaving their ministry in August 1983, she gave two stationery books to the church for the recording of the minutes of the deacons meeting and for those of the church meeting. In September 1983, although she was no longer the minister and Elaine Marsh was then present chairing the meeting (and probably occupying the manse), the deacons reported that Elsie had given a new bath to the manse and it was ready to be installed. At that same meeting the suggestion was made that Elsie should be asked to accept the title of minister emeritus of the church. The choir had made known its keenness to continue so Elsie had agreed to lead it once a month, travelling over from Taunton, as no other conductor or accompanist had come forward. One month later Elsie had accepted the title of minister emeritus and she also had written to state that an interest free loan would be available shortly to the church, for the purpose of buying a new property in Church Close, for a manse. The old five bed-roomed manse was then for sale and Elsie, Elaine Marsh and two others were to form a small committee to oversee the sale. Elsie was determined that the old manse should go and set her heart on the church obtaining a new one. The deacons agreed to accept the loan with gratitude. In Elaine's time at Chulmleigh, Elsie would sleep downstairs in the manse's dining room, in a chair which "let out", while Elaine used a bed-room. Elaine felt a presence in the living room which was later explained by the discovery that the sewer, which flowed under the house, had developed a leak and an unpleasant odour had escaped.

Elsie was back in November 1983 leading worship. In December Elaine Marsh chaired the deacons' meeting but Elsie was among those present and she opened the meeting in prayer. Elsie was also present at the

²² Chulmleigh Deacons Minutes - 25 Oct 1982, 13 Feb 1983, North St Church Minutes - 25 Nov 1982, J Hibbs loc cit .

church and deacons' meetings in January and February 1984 although Elaine Marsh chaired on both occasions. However in May, Elaine informed the deacons that she was returning to the USA in July, thus bringing to a close the year of ministry which she had originally agreed to give to Chulmleigh. At this same meeting it was stated that Elsie was endeavouring to find a minister for the church but also that she had herself consented to preach at the church in the autumn.²³

At the annual general meeting in July 1984 Elsie was in the chair. It was stated that, although Elaine Marsh had become their minister in August 1983, Elsie had "continued to be a constant good friend to our church". The members decided that more communion cups and hymn books were needed - a sure sign that the congregation was growing - and Elsie volunteered to obtain them. Several church and deacons' meetings in late 1984 were chaired by Elsie. In October she encouraged people to train as lay preachers and in November she revealed her eagerness to lead "a candlelight get together" at 6 pm on Christmas Day. In September 1984 she had asked the lay preachers at North Street, Taunton to make a regular commitment to conduct the services at Chulmleigh on the first Sunday of every month. In December 1984 Elsie told the church that Elaine Marsh was returning in April 1985 for six months. In July 1985 Elsie had called a brief deacons' meeting, prior to the church's annual general meeting, at which she announced that Elaine Marsh had offered her services as minister to the church at Chulmleigh for two years, commencing in January 1986. The deacons were very happy at this news. Elsewhere it was explained that Elaine had already spent two spells of time serving the church and her return merely made the point that "She loves the Chulmleigh people and they love her".

In November 1985 Elsie was again present at the church and deacons' meetings. She was to conduct "Carols by Candlelight" on Christmas Day and she was still available to lead worship in the summer of 1986, notably a Sunday evening of singing the old favourite hymns, associated with the nineteenth century American evangelists, Moody and Sankey. Elsie's repeated involvement with Chulmleigh suggests that, although Elsie had formally resigned the pastorate there in 1983, while she remained in the south-west, serving North Street Congregational Church, Taunton, she made

²³ Chulmleigh Church Minutes 1983 onwards - 26 Oct, 15 Dec 1983, 19 Jan, 16 Feb, 15 March 1984, Chulmleigh Deacons Minutes 1983-1997 - 15 and 26 Sept, 1 Dec 1983, 19 Jan, 16 Feb 21 May 1984.

herself open to help the Congregationalists at Chulmleigh whenever possible.²⁴

In January 1987 Elaine Marsh and her friend, Alice Huston, made known their decision that they had put their home in Minneapolis on the market, intending to settle permanently in England. Elsie stated that Elaine not only came to Chulmleigh “and saw and conquered” but she was herself “conquered”. Influenced by Elsie she had come to love Chulmleigh “and its people and the Westcountry so much”. Elsie was still helping Chulmleigh on occasions and, in May 1987, she conducted services on two successive Sundays.²⁵

Elaine Marsh

Elaine Marsh first met Elsie at the William Booth Memorial College, Denmark Hill, in south London at the International Congregational Fellowship meeting in 1977. Elaine was serving as the chaplain to the meeting and opened the conference with worship. On the platform were Mary Wilson, Lady Stansgate and Elsie Chamberlain. The time for tea followed and some of the ladies, preferring not to walk across the campus to the tea rooms, took it together backstage. As a result of this and other contacts during the conference, the two became friends. For many years Elaine had been minister at Plymouth church, Minneapolis and, as the date for her retirement was approaching, Elsie had asked her to consider coming to the UK to care for one of the Congregational Federation’s churches. Elaine was due to retire in 1983. At the ICF committee meeting in Wisconsin, Elaine renewed her friendship with Elsie who attended with Jean Young and Felicity Cleaves. Elaine expected the English ladies to be “rather proper” and so she decided to wear a skirt. However all the English ladies, including Elsie, wore trousers and Elaine felt that she should not be the odd woman out so she changed into trousers.

On her return to England, Elsie kept up her correspondence with Elaine and on seeing her at the ICF meetings at Bangor in 1981 she asked again, “Why are you not serving a church in the UK yet?” Elaine had not then

²⁴ Chulmleigh Church Minutes - 5 July, 12 Aug, 14 Oct, 9 Dec 1984, 14 July, 24 Nov 1985, Chulmleigh Deacons Minutes - 29 Nov 1984, 14 July, 5 Nov 1985, 10 July 1986, North St Church Minutes - 27 Sept 1984, Congregational Quarterly (Sept 1985) vol 3, no 3, 23 .

²⁵ Chulmleigh Deacons Minutes - 20 Jan 1987, Chulmleigh Church Minutes - 24 Nov 1987, Hibbs loc cit.

retired but she did agree to come to Chulmleigh to take over from Elsie when she left the pastorate. Elaine stated that she would come for a year while her friend, Alice, with whom she had lived for many years, remained in the USA to look after their house. Elaine's arrival on 1 July 1983 coincided with Chulmleigh Congregational Church's celebration of their 350th anniversary.

After spending a little time at Elsie's house in Cornwall, Elaine and Alice felt that they knew Elsie much better. Indeed Elaine's opinion of Elsie rose so markedly that she came to regard her as one of the most exceptional people she had ever met. Elaine tells a story which conveys something of Elsie's eccentricity and her no frills attitude. At an ordination service, in which she was to play a leading role, she looked down and noticed that her dress worryingly was really neither long enough nor formal enough. The remedy was obvious. She simply reached down and ripped the hem, smoothing it down with her hand. She explained that under her cassock the hem line would be obscured.

While Elaine was at Chulmleigh, Elsie would drive over "once in a while" from Taunton in her Volvo and Elaine could see that folk at Chulmleigh almost worshipped her. The success of the Sunday evening service there was helped by Elsie having no competition at that time from the Methodist and the parish churches. Even Roman Catholics joined regulars from these other churches at the Congregational chapel on a Sunday evening. The fellowship in the church grew in many ways - a Christmas bazaar in the town hall, a Maundy Thursday pancake supper - but, although larger numbers of people attended church events and the worship, they would not become church members. One of the Anglican women who often attended those functions which Elsie led and inspired was the widowed mother of a parson in London. He reported that his mother had guiltily confessed that she had gone, and wanted to continue going to the chapel to see and hear Elsie. With an air of wonderment and amusement, he related to Congregational neighbours in London that she had asked his permission to attend Elsie's activities in the chapel!

In 1984 Elsie reflected on her three and a half years' experience of west country churchmanship. She had found that "the men leave the women to 'do the religious thing' especially in the villages" and she had observed that "there are Church of England women outside the big towns who still look down on their Free Church neighbours, some of whom are given an inferiority complex by this old-fashioned attitude".²⁶ If that attitude had ever

²⁶ Free Church Chronicle (Autumn 1984) no 3, vol XXXIX, 2.

existed in Chulmleigh, Elsie and Elaine had both done their level best to break it down, with some success. At the end of her year in Devon, Elaine faced the necessity of returning to the USA for her friend had suffered a stroke in her absence. However Alice's doctor advised her that she was well enough to come to England for a few weeks' holiday before they travelled home together.

Elsie became concerned for the Congregational church at Dulverton, in Somerset, some 16 or 17 miles from Chulmleigh, which was then experiencing difficulties. In 1984 Elsie asked Elaine to preach at Dulverton once a month, as a regular commitment, and she agreed. Elaine could not easily leave these west country churches for she was even visited in the USA by friends from Chulmleigh and from Dulverton - a measure of the positive impression she had made. When the time came for Elaine to end her monthly commitment to Dulverton, the church members there had a minister coming to serve them in six months but decided to ask Elaine to continue as their minister until his arrival.

In the autumn of 1984 Elaine returned from the USA to Dulverton as minister there for six months but, at that time, Chulmleigh had no minister so she served them also. Consequently Elaine preached on a Sunday morning in Dulverton and in the evening at Chulmleigh. In 1985, at the end of this six months' period, she agreed to return to Chulmleigh as their minister. Her companion, Alice, was to retire from her job in Minneapolis, enabling the two friends to set up home there. Elaine's promise to Elsie of a year's ministry at Chulmleigh Congregational Church led to her giving well over nine years to that church, from which she finally retired in 1992, when she moved to Dulverton which she had also happily served and where she still lives.

North Street Taunton

In April 1982 the church meeting noted that improvements to the kitchen were needed. By September a new sink and a new water heater had been installed and, in passing, the members were grateful for the increase in giving to the Sunday collections. By May 1983 the church kitchen had been re-decorated and new units had been acquired and fitted. In December 1982 the minister had shared her concern that the church at North Street, being set in the centre of Taunton, should do more for the town.

In May 1982 Elsie brought to the deacons meeting her keen desire to have John Murray, an United Reformed Church minister who had retired to Taunton, helping with the work at North Street. She was ready to take £500

less per annum in her stipend, if the church could raise another £500 and give Murray a total of £1000 p a. She hoped that he would preach on Sunday evenings and assume other duties. To their credit, the deacons did not want to pay Elsie less but agreed in principle that John Murray's help would be an asset to the church. However, in June it was reported that Murray had replied, stating that he was not willing to share the ministry officially, but was prepared to assist with Sunday preaching when required.

Murray, formerly a Congregationalist, was not the only URC minister who regularly gave support to North Street. Another frequent visitor was his friend, Owen Butler, also a former Congregationalist, who led worship regularly at North Street and, with Murray, met the minister for prayer and discussion. The records suggest that Murray's contribution to the church's life was far in excess of his restrained offer of June 1982. At the annual general meeting of the church in March 1983, Elsie thanked John Murray for his valuable support throughout the past year. In April he informed the church meeting of the work of those lay missionaries who were seeking to make effective contact with people on the fringes of the church. He believed that this might be a fruitful avenue for North Street to explore in its outreach. In February 1984 Murray was chairing the church meeting in the absence of the minister and he was thanked again, at the annual general meeting in March 1985, for his help throughout the previous year.²⁷

Owen Butler was an old friend of Elsie's. They had known each other since he had been a student for the ministry at New College, London (where Murray had also trained) in the 1930s, before either of them had been ordained. His friend and fellow student at New College knew her family in Islington and they would have tea together. Butler's first pastorate from 1939 to 1951 was at Northampton and he recruited Elsie to preach for him there. After serving Congregational churches in Harrow and Hastings, he had given oversight to the United Reformed Church at Minehead 1977-83 and had retired to Taunton.²⁸ He found Elsie to be a devoted, capable and enthusiastic friend to the church at North Street.

²⁷ North St Deacons Minutes - 13 May, 10 June, 1982, 4 June 1983, North St Church Minutes - 22 April, 23 Sept, 16 Dec 1982, 17 March 1983, 23 Feb 1984, 25 March 1985. United Reformed Church Year Book (URCYB) (1984-5).

²⁸ URCYB (2003) 191.

Miscellaneous Concerns

Other matters occupied Elsie's Taunton ministry. In December 1982 she was troubled about the elderly who would be alone at Christmas, singling out one old lady who needed a family to invite her to spend some time during the holiday with them. Elsie felt that the congregation was not good at saying "Amen" to the prayers in worship. In June 1983 the church planned a new lay-out for its magazine and in April 1984 Elsie returned to two favourite themes, that of the church's publicity which, in her view, should be better and the welcoming of newcomers to the fellowship. Theft of church keys by an unwelcome intruder caused a degree of anxiety in May 1984.

A measure of the church's modest success at this time was that the Bible study meeting had grown so large that it was deemed necessary to divide into two groups. By October 1985 Elsie was encouraging the North Street folk to attend the Congregational Federation's rallies in the south-west area in greater numbers, especially when these were held in the smaller churches, close to her heart, where a good attendance would give a fillip to the local church people. In November 1985 Elsie felt that a suitable way to mark her fifth anniversary at Taunton would be to invite all couples whom she had married there, and the parents of those children whom she had baptised, to attend one particular Sunday evening service and to stay for coffee afterwards.²⁹

Property Considerations at North Street

In late December 1983 the church meeting learned of proposals to alter the property at the back of the church. The local social services department had indicated that they would favour the provision of a crèche for the children of shoppers in this space or alternatively the building of warden controlled flats for the mentally handicapped. The church members were also told that proposals for a music school had been made and that the voluntary sector in Taunton was in need of offices. Returning to this theme of redevelopment in March 1984, at the annual general meeting, Elsie expressed her hope that the church halls might in time be replaced by flats for the elderly. Repairs to the church property, especially to the drive, were discussed at the church meeting in May 1984.

Some frustration was clearly felt by the church in its efforts to find a viable scheme for the redevelopment of the property to its rear. In July 1984

²⁹ North St Church Minutes - 9 Dec 1982, 23 June 1983, 12 April, 24 May, 27 Sept 1984, North St Deacons Minutes - 7 Oct, 11 Nov 1985.

the church members were told that the number of flats which could adequately be built in the available space would be insufficient to justify the expense involved. In January 1985 Elsie met the local Member of Parliament for Taunton, the distinguished Conservative, Sir Edward du Cann, in an attempt to enlist his help for the desired redevelopment. He promised to do what he could.³⁰

In the summer of 1985 it was revealed that the town council, wishing to enhance the appearance of the town centre, intended to floodlight some of the churches, including North Street Congregational Church. In April 1986 she reported that she had spoken to a planning officer from the local council, enquiring whether it might be possible to build a bungalow in the church garden and gain formal approval for this. The officer stated that such a structure might be deemed to add to the safety of the church which was a listed building. Were the manse in Ashley Road to be put on the market, its estimated price would be in the region of £40,000 to £50,000.³¹

In March 1986 an extraordinary church meeting was held at which the minister stressed the need for a sound church roof. She stated that the sale of the manse and the building of a bungalow in the church garden would release enough money to enable the necessary roof repairs to be completed. Estimates suggested that a sum of £13,000 was required. Elsie also spoke of the alterations which were due to be carried out in the near future at the back of the church by the Manpower Services Unit. The church would be expected to fund some of this work and she stated that she wished to pay for part of the expenses herself, that is for the materials needed and the necessary heating, providing the church agreed to accept the estimate for the roof repairs and that this work commenced quickly. This offer was accepted by a clear majority. By May the order for the roof repairs had been placed and by June the work had started and was expected to be finished in three or four weeks.³²

Invitation to Nottingham

Having acquired the former Castle Gate Congregational Church and hall premises in Nottingham from the United Reformed Church (intending to use

³⁰ For Sir Edward du Cann see Who's Who (2002) 606.

³¹ North St Deacons Minutes - 10 Feb, 28 April 1986, North St Church Minutes - 22 Dec 1983, 23 Feb, 15 March, 26 April, 26 July 1984, 24 Jan 1985, 24 March 1986, Congregational Quarterly (Sept 1985) vol 3, no 3, 23.

³² North St Church Minutes - 24 March, 22 May, 23 June 1986.

them as offices, student rooms, and for church purposes), the Congregational Federation held a service of thanksgiving in September 1981. Those arriving early were amazed to discover Elsie, as practical and unstuffy as ever, on her knees washing the floor. Elsie hoped that the new centre in Nottingham would be “a place where we can learn more about the faith and find new inspiration for the work that is to be done”. The formal opening of the Congregational Centre in Castle Gate occurred a year later in September 1982 when Elsie, speaking last, struck an uncharacteristically solemn note, by reminding the assembly that “the fulfilment of the dream depends on the reality of our faith”. She became a regular visitor to the Castle Gate buildings for CF council and committee meetings. In late 1982 she addressed the Federation of Congregational Women, in the east midlands area there, taking the theme that “the Kingdom of God is within you” and urging those present to communicate the gospel to people outside the churches.³³

In September 1983 the minister spoke to the deacons at North Street about the new church which was then being founded in Castle Gate, Nottingham, to which building the offices of the Congregational Federation had been moved. She had been invited to lead worship in Nottingham on two Sundays each month and, keen to accept, she sought the approval of the deacons for this arrangement. John Murray was willing to deputise for her in Taunton. Knowing the determined nature of their minister and probably that resisting her will was pointless, the deacons gave their formal assent. In November she reported on these developments to the church meeting. She informed the meeting that she would be leading worship in Nottingham on alternate Sunday mornings for the next three months. In her absence from Taunton the members learned that the reliable John Murray had “graciously” agreed to conduct the services at North Street.³⁴

As a result of Elsie’s ministry in Nottingham, she would often travel the 185 miles between the English east midlands and Taunton on Sundays, so that she would conduct the morning service in Nottingham and the evening service in Taunton, an unenviable prospect for anyone in the prime of life but a gruelling task for a woman in her 70s. On one occasion, when her own vehicle was misbehaving, Elsie was grateful for a lift from Nottingham to Taunton in the car of her friends, Millicent and Kenneth Slack. This routine

³³ Congregational News (Nov-Dec 1981) 2, (Nov-Dec 1982) 2, (Jan-Feb 1983) 2, The Bangor Challenge. International Congregational Fellowship Record of Proceedings (Los Angeles, USA 1981) 28.

³⁴ North St Deacons Minutes - 8 Sept, 1983, Church Minutes - 24 Nov 1983.

of travelling between the two towns continued for two and a half years. Although Elsie was an experienced driver, opinions differ as to her prowess behind the wheel!

Not until January 1984, however, did the church at Castle Gate hold its first church meeting. At this, the members unsurprisingly were unanimous in their invitation to Elsie to become their minister although it was stated that she was to occupy this position "in an honorary capacity". Elsie was present in Nottingham at this church meeting which in a more settled fellowship might be considered improper but this church was in its infancy. In truth this was a missionary situation and Elsie had been involved in gathering this church almost from its beginnings. She was therefore able to give an immediate answer to the church - again very unusual for a minister when invited to serve a pastorate - and she accepted.³⁵

Ministry in Nottingham

At the first church meeting of the Congregational Centre church since her appointment as its minister, in February 1984, Elsie reported that her friend, Viscountess Stansgate, had asked if she could become an associate church member of the new fellowship. The meeting agreed to her request. The church saw a small but steady flow of new members throughout 1984 and 1985 (in the latter year it had 12 members). Indeed the church made every attempt to increase its membership, approaching a number of people to consider making a commitment to the church. In January 1986 nine new members were recorded as having joined the church during the past year, making a total of 21. At the annual general meeting, Elsie commented that she wanted to maintain the church's reputation as "a very friendly Church ... a place of friendship, helpfulness and inspiration" and she hoped that in 1986 it would become "a place of study". She stated that she may be resident in Nottingham for the winter of 1986, instead of commuting between Somerset and Nottingham as she had been doing for two years then. In January 1986 the Congregational Federation was noted for having expressed "its joy" at the centre church's growth and in Elsie's final year of ministry the church returned a figure of 29 members.

In March 1985 enquiries about their using the Castle Gate church were made by Methodists in central Nottingham who were seeking a temporary home while their former place of worship was being demolished and replaced. They expected to be without their own premises for approximately

³⁵ Nottingham Centre Church Meeting Minutes - 15 Jan 1984.

one year. Elsie and John Wilcox, a member of the Congregational church, had met some delegates from the Methodists and discussed the possibility of joint services and shared accommodation (perhaps a united Sunday morning service and a Methodist service on Sunday evenings). The Congregationalists were keen to welcome the Methodists for any period of time but in June 1985 the Methodists had still not made any firm decision and in September they felt unable to commit themselves until the new year. Eventually the Methodists found it possible to continue using part of their own building, although their minister did occupy an office in the Congregational complex in Castle Gate.

Elsie arranged to give a series of lectures at the church on Biblical subjects in the five weeks before Christmas 1985 - these were later judged to be "a highlight of the year". One church member was keen to set up a group for depressives or perhaps leukaemia sufferers at the centre. Elsie agreed to meet a local psychotherapist to see if she could advise on the practicability of such a scheme.³⁶ In September 1987 a carewatch centre was to be set up for Nottingham in the premises. It was intended that this would work along lines first developed within Congregational churches by John Pellow at his church in Tower Hamlets, in east London. Pellow, an unusual minister, who since his ordination in 1957 only served one pastorate, Coverdale and Ebenezer, Stepney, was to act as adviser to the Nottingham scheme. One year later a young theology graduate, Deborah Reynolds, was appointed, as the officer to manage the Care Trust. Although she had completed her training for the ministry and was accepted by the church as the assistant minister from the outset, she was not ordained immediately. She was also employed at the centre as the Nottingham Care Watch Officer. In the following January, it was stated that a service of induction and ordination for Debbie should be arranged which occurred in April.³⁷

Elsie returned to broadcasting while at Nottingham with the local radio station for which she made some Sunday morning programmes in 1989 and she continued writing radio scripts until her death in early 1991. In 1988 she was the guest of honour at the sixtieth anniversary of the BBC's daily service, broadcast from All Souls, Langham Place, London. At this time she

³⁶ Nottingham Centre Church Minutes - 19 Feb 1984, 11 Jan, 13 March, 27 June, 12 Sept 13 Nov 1985, 19 Jan, 20 March 1986, CYB (1985) 88, (1990-1991) 54.

³⁷ Nottingham Centre Church Minutes - 22 Sept 1987, 20 Sept 1988, 10 Jan 1989, CYB (1958) 397.

was interviewed on BBC Radio Four's programme, Women's Hour, after which she stated candidly that she had enjoyed more the pre-broadcast conversation, outside the studio, than that she had had on the air. In September 1989 she proposed the church held "prayer services for shoppers" on Thursdays at 2.30 pm beginning in October. Elsie also was keen for the church to perform some of her musical favourites and in April 1990 the church members were described as being "stretched" by the demands of Stainer's Crucifixion, while it was noted that they would soon be asked to put on Handel's Messiah. In February 1990 the church meeting learned that Debbie Reynolds was to marry and leave Care Watch and that she would be moving to Birmingham. At this time also the Congregational Federation was considering the appointment of a warden to Cleaves Hall which would allow Elsie to return to the manse "if she wished". Elsie did use the manse which was situated in The Park but she felt a responsibility for the Castle Gate residents (mostly students at the various colleges in the town).

She bought with her brother, Ronald, one of the self-contained flats in the Castle Gate block in memory of their mother and Elsie naturally assumed the role of an unpaid warden of Cleaves Hall. Three months later no warden had been appointed, although the centre church members were concerned about "the pressures on the Minister" and welcomed the church secretary's initiative "to persuade her to spend two days per week away from the Castlegate premises". Certainly the centre of Nottingham can be a noisy place at night time and Elsie is remembered as having telephoned friends in Taunton to ask if anyone was sleeping in the spare bed. She found it difficult at times to sleep in the flat in Castle Gate and, on learning that the spare bed was unoccupied, she drove through the night, arriving at 3 am. The bell rang and there stood Elsie in a plastic mac, holding a cup of tea. She had been so keen to leave that she had forgotten to bring a dressing gown!³⁸

At Nottingham Elsie was no autocrat in the church. She would routinely discuss her proposals with the church officers and she would take advice. She used candles once in worship and wanted to have them as a regular part of the Sunday service but, when advised to put them aside, she did so. She would listen to the church members at the church meeting and act accordingly, not forcing her desires down their throats. The members were encouraged to air their views although Elsie liked the meetings to reach agreement. However the observant noticed that Elsie, for all her experience,

³⁸ Nottingham Centre Church Minutes - 20 June, 19 Sept 1989, 14 February, 28 April, 9 May 1990.

would be just as nervous before the small congregation at Nottingham as she might be before a huge audience. She was a loyal colleague and, at most of her churches, she made generous and significant financial contributions, usually anonymously.

Leaving Taunton

In the mid-1980s Elsie seems, in retrospect, to have been aware that she should slow down a little, although her activity was still considerable. She had given up her position as chairman of the council of the Congregational Federation in 1985 - a post she had held since 1978 - and in February 1986 she confided to the Taunton deacons that she feared she could not continue at North Street for another winter. She was clearly preparing them for her departure which would occur later that year. Elsie was actively looking for a successor at this time and she informed the deacons that she intended to leave the church on 8th June when she would preach her last sermon at the church. She admitted that she had two people in mind whom she thought might be suitable to take over the ministry at North Street on a part-time basis. However in this she was to suffer disappointment and in May 1986 John Murray was asked and agreed to lead the church during the gap ahead, with the title of "interim moderator". In June that year Elsie was treated to a farewell luncheon at which a presentation was made to her. Also that month, John Murray met the Congregational Federation's minister for pastoral settlements, Bill Bentham, to discuss the pastoral situation. Bentham had advised Murray that the church might yet be able to afford a full time minister, with a recommended stipend of £5000 per annum, plus expenses of £400. In the light of this advice, the church decided to "consider its options". Subsequently in March 1987, Ray Avent was invited to become the minister at North Street, an invitation which he was led to accept.³⁹

Following Elsie was always going to be difficult but the new minister on the whole found his inheritance at North Street beneficial, although he prudently explained to the church that he could not be another Elsie Chamberlain! John Murray and Owen Butler for some years continued to be of great help both to the church and to the minister, freely sharing their wisdom and experience.

³⁹ North St Deacons Minutes - 10 Feb, 28 April 1986, North St Church Minutes - 22 Dec 1983, 23 Feb, 15 March, 26 April, 26 July 1984, 24 Jan 1985, 24 March, 22 May, 23 June 1986, 19 March 1987.

Elsie's Taunton Ministry

Elsie is recalled at Taunton as having brought a sense of energy and enthusiasm to the church although she was noted for her plain speaking. On her pastoral visits she always made herself at home and put people at their ease, although if she thought anyone was in the wrong then she would tell them. She was popular with everybody in the church. She was the choir-mistress and encouraged the choir in all its undertakings. Her predecessor as minister of the church, Gerald Gossage, had left it in a healthy condition. She further enhanced its reputation as a family church so that all came to feel that they belonged. Certainly Elsie made great efforts to attract more people to attend the worship and her name came to be widely known around the town. On one occasion when the church held a sale of work only a handful of people initially turned up, so Elsie took herself off to the pavement to draw passers by into the building - and they came. In her time at North Street it became customary during any church sale to put some stalls outside in the drive, especially in the summer, and this proved successful and has continued. She was proud that in 1985 her Taunton church, with less than 100 members, gave £646 on one Sunday for relief work in Ethiopia and she held this up as an example of what fellowships across the country could do, if sufficiently motivated.⁴⁰ Elsie began the practice of the church members singing hymns on occasions, during the week and on a Sunday, in the church drive. Although she did not start a band at Taunton, nevertheless she would regularly encourage those with musical instruments to play them in church.

She was not content with the architectural settings and internal design of the church. At one point she had considered moving the worship area upstairs and putting in a false floor but the professional advice received was strongly against this. The building's foundations simply would not stand the strain. North Street Congregational Church, it seemed, had been built in a hurry. Elsie was keen to have a central aisle to aid funerals and weddings but the Fire Service vetoed the alterations which might make this possible. One particular wedding, which she conducted at North Street, proved to be trying for her as children were allowed to run up and down too freely. She simply stopped the service and said to the congregation, "Until you all behave I shall go no further". In conversation with one of her friends in the church, she later confessed, "You know, dear, I really prefer funerals. I know they'll be happy"!

Elsie's stated preference not to live on her own resulted in her having

⁴⁰ Free Church Chronicle (Spring 1985) no 1, vol XL, 2.

some young nurses living with her in the North Street manse. It was convenient for them because the hospital is situated nearby. However she sometimes took risks which others then judged “frightening” and would properly be frowned upon by professionals in the social services. A young man came to church one Sunday and declared that he had nowhere to stay. Consequently Elsie took him home with her, even though she had the nurses in the house. Understandably they were not happy with the situation and made their feelings known. When later Elsie moved home from Taunton to Nottingham this same young man followed her there. Her Taunton church members were not alone in worrying for her and in believing that it had not been sensible for her to take him in as she did. Friends at Nottingham were later to feel a similar concern when they saw her take difficult people into her flat there. Some of her visitors seemed awkward, threatening and even violent and Elsie was, in the view of these friends, often deceived with fanciful stories and cheated out of her money.

Elsie was a painstaking pastor. On one occasion, the death of a church member necessitated a telephone call to the minister whom, it was believed, would be found in Chulmleigh. However it was discovered that she was not in Devon but rather was in London, some one hundred and eighty miles away, yet, having learned of the death and the widow’s needs, Elsie drove back to Taunton, arriving after 11.30 pm. She was a widow herself and understood the desolation of grief, having never really come to terms with the loss of her husband. She spoke of her husband, John, frequently to her Taunton friends, recalling with affection all that they had done together. In 1981 she stated that during the past 3 years “through circumstances that I greatly regret”, that is John’s death, she had been able to devote her time to the Lord’s work “and it has given me as much joy to make up for the sorrow as one could expect of life”.⁴¹

During her Taunton ministry, the usually hale and hearty Elsie suffered some bouts of ill health. In February 1982 her arthritis was so painful and distressing that she was bedridden - she had suffered arthritis since her youth. In March 1983 she had influenza so badly that she confessed to spending at least one night “in the depths of melancholy”, for her a rare and uncharacteristically normal admission. On this occasion she was comforted to receive a greetings card from the church members which they had all signed. Only one month after Elsie had left her ministry at Taunton, the members there were still concerned for her health. It was reported to the

⁴¹ The Bangor Challenge 32.

church meeting that she was “very poorly” in health and was in hospital in Nottingham undergoing tests. In December 1986 Elsie’s participation in the official opening of Cleaves Hall in Nottingham (adjoining the former Castle Gate church) was recorded. She had chosen to exhort and “stir up” the assembly and was against the settling down which she diagnosed as the disease of the church. She wanted Christians to trust the Holy Spirit to guide and stir them up. However prior to the gathering, Elsie had been in hospital undergoing tests and she had only been discharged so that she might take part in these opening celebrations.⁴² Delegates to the British Council of Churches noticed that Elsie in the 1980s was very badly stricken with arthritis. Yet they admired her willingness to maintain her witness to her principles, even when they set her apart from the majority of her fellow delegates.

Membership

Elsie Chamberlain began her ministry at Chulmleigh in 1980. In the previous year the church had 18 members, 9 adherents, one lay preacher and no children. It held one service per week, at 6.30 pm on a Sunday. In 1980 the church membership had fallen to 15 and the downward trend seemed likely to continue. That was the situation when Elsie arrived. By 1983 the trend had been reversed. The membership had grown to 21. There were 10 adherents, 13 children and the service had been moved half an hour earlier to 6 pm. Sadly the lay preacher no longer was listed in the returned statistics. In 1984, the year after Elsie had officially left the ministry at Chulmleigh, the membership stood at an even more impressive 24, although no children were listed as attending the church. At that time Elsie’s friend and successor, Elaine Marsh, was the minister and in her time the church membership grew to 31 in 1985, and to 35 in 1986 when 18 children were recorded.⁴³ Elaine recalled having 40 regularly attending the church and a women’s group of 22. These returns suggest that the dramatic effort undertaken in the town in the 1980s did not go unrewarded.

The figures at Taunton do not tell quite the same story. In 1979 the membership at North Street stood at 94, with 16 adherents, 10 children and

⁴² North Street Congregational Church Magazine - Feb 1982, March 1983.

Copies are held at the church. North St Church Minutes - 24 July 1986.

Much of the information above derives from the church members.

Congregational Quarterly (Dec 1986) vol 4, no 4, 16.

⁴³ CYB (1979-1980) 93, (1980-1981) 97, (1983) 96, (1984) 96, (1985) 98, (1985-1986) 59.

no lay preacher. Two services were held on Sundays. One year later, also before Elsie's arrival, the members had increased by two to 96, the adherents were 24 in number, as also were the children. In 1983 there were 95 members, 30 adherents and 30 children. One year later, however, the membership had fallen to 77 but the numbers of adherents and of children alike had both risen to 60. In 1985 the membership still stood at 77 but the church had acquired 85 adherents while the children remained steady at 60. Elsie herself commented at the church meeting in July that year that many among the large number of adherents at North Street should really become church members. In Elsie's last year at the church at Taunton the membership had grown to 80 but, in 1987, Ray Avent's first year at North Street, it fell to 54, growing to 59 in 1989, while the numbers of children fell to 20.⁴⁴

We may conclude from these figures - especially those relating to adherents- that Elsie was particularly good at attracting the occasional passers by, even the regular visitors, and their children, whom she called the newcomers so often in the church meetings, to worship at North Street. But, like others who lacked her special charisma and allure, she was not able to overcome their deep seated reservations and convert such attenders into committed church members in either town, although she had more success in this respect in Chulmleigh than in Taunton. Scholars have recognised believing but not belonging as a characteristic of the age. After Elsie's departure from Taunton, the huge number of adherents, even exceeding that of the church members, seems to have lost interest and melted away. How deeply did her Christian faith touch their hearts and minds?

Clearly Elsie had a positive impact on both churches and on their respective communities. One woman, even with all her energy and dynamism, could not on her own reverse national trends. Yet she could hardly be blamed for trying! Certainly she brought the people in both churches out of any quiet resignation that decline was inevitable and should, therefore, not be challenged. Challenge was, after all, meat and drink to Elsie and her best efforts did yield dividends but would they be permanent? Was Elsie just a flash in the pan, bright, colourful, attractive, but bound to fizzle out sooner or later and leave no lasting benefit? The church people in both Taunton and Chulmleigh would not agree with this harsh assessment but

⁴⁴ CYB (1979-1980) 96, (1980-1981) 99, (1983) 98, (1984) 96, (1985) 100, (1985-1986) 61, (1987-1988) 61, (1989-1990) 64, North St Church Minutes - 22 July 1985.

what of the townsfolk?

The International Congregational Fellowship: Bangor 1981

In early July 1981, at Bangor, in north Wales, the ICF held its second formal meeting. Elsie attended among the delegates from the Congregational Federation and was chosen as the representative from England to be introduced to the mayor at the formal welcome. Later in open discussion Elsie turned to the topical theme of Christian unity, one of her preoccupations. She asked, "Would you say that we would do more to move towards a sense of unity if ... we could offer to people the simplicity of our Congregational basis without demanding any change in their structures? We all believe in Jesus Christ and ... when his presence is with us there is the church, can we not claim to the world that we are one in Christ and let them go on with their own administrations and structures and bishops if they want them? Isn't this the way towards unity, we'll never do it in detail as they are doing it now?"

Another of her preoccupations surfaced at Bangor when Elsie spoke of her wish that church members would trust the Holy Spirit more. She expressed frustration that Christians so often made excuses in order to avoid tackling a challenging but necessary task. If they were to trust the Holy Spirit, they would discover "this excitement of the Christian life" which was for her "the exciting part of service". She offered a criticism of those Christians who "were tied to material things", pointing to her own previous church "where I loved my folk for nine years, and still love them". Was this a reference to Hutton Free Church? But "they were all on the up and up, they were all earning more money - at least most of them", she said. She saw such materialism and the desire for "social success" and "money-making" as a loss of the "tremendous freedom we have been given" and "very sad". She cautioned her listeners, "We must be careful of the demands of modern life which get in the way of our freedom".⁴⁵

The National Free Church Women's Council

Elsie had long been an active encourager of women's work in the churches. She felt that the National Free Church Women's Council, in particular, failed to publicise its doings well enough so that its achievements went largely unnoticed. Elsie was elected president of the National Free Church Women's Council, assuming that office in 1984 at the congress of the

⁴⁵ The Bangor Challenge (Los Angeles 1981) 9, 27, 32, 34.

Free Church Federal Council at Eastbourne in Sussex and serving until the following year. On the assembly platform with her were the retiring FCFC moderator, her old friend and sparring partner, Kenneth Slack, and Howard Williams, the incoming moderator who was the minister of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London. She confided to a friend later, in one of her favourite sayings, that at the FCFC “ we can assemble in unity and not be disagreeable”.

Her presidential address was entitled “Dissent and Freedom”, both of which she believed were not valued sufficiently by contemporary Free Churchmen. She commented on the setting up of yet another committee to examine the purpose and future of the FCFC, stating that “on the whole men call for committees and commissions and conferences while the women get on with the job”. However, she did confess to having sat on a few committees herself and that she relished the prospect - “I enjoy the cut and thrust of it”. Yet she prayed that the churches of England should “always ... remain organisationally divided” because she could not bear to think of the time it would take “to construct a constitution to include all of us”. All the administration involved in such a scheme she dismissed as “ridiculous”, an adjective she applied also to “the covenant” for unity which had by then failed, although she believed that the hours spent, by the denominational delegates in each others’ company, were worthwhile because we came to “believe in one another and forget that we had previously used our different structures as barriers”. Rather she invited her listeners to “delight in the variety of religious experience and liturgy and worship - yes, and of theology and doctrine and organisation and constitution - all a spur to our deeper thought”.

She then turned her attention to Christian involvement in social and political issues - teenage sex, video nasties, drug abuse, prostitution, aid to under-developed countries, international peace, unemployment, poverty and greed - and she anticipated that she would be called “simplistic” for her refusal to turn a blind eye and her hope to find some way to tackle these issues. Yet she maintained that the freedom of the Free Churches, and of Christians in general, and Christian women in particular, should be used in their being “constructively different”.

During Elsie’s year of office the Free Church women had undertaken to raise enough money to fund the sinking of two wells in the drought stricken parts of Africa. By the spring of 1985 the sum raised was £6000 and she had hopes of more than doubling that in order to pay for ten wells. She retained her faith in the conscience of Free Church women, remarking that where that

conscience was awake “there is a great power working”.

In 1985 the new FCFC moderator, the Welsh Congregationalist R Tudur Jones, paid tribute to his predecessor, Howard Williams, and to Elsie Chamberlain, as the retiring president of the Women’s Council, whom, he stated, had “discharged the responsibilities of her office with her customary energy and good humour”. Her successor as women’s president, Dorothy Alexander, also thanked Elsie for her “guidance and example”. She continued, “Elsie has thrown herself into the work of the Women’s Council with characteristic wholehearted zeal. While she ministers to her own two churches - so widely spaced geographically”- (Taunton and Nottingham) “she has not spared herself, but has travelled all over the country to visit and inspire the Women’s Councils who have invited her to their meetings.” She spoke of Elsie’s influence after one such visit. “I know, myself, from her visit to us at Cheltenham, that women leave her conferences stimulated and with greater determination, not only to carry on their existing work, but also to be ready to see other needs”.

Elsie had consistently been a vehement and impatient supporter of the ministry of women. Before the Methodist Church ordained women she refused to write or speak on behalf of the Methodists because she believed that they discriminated unfairly against their deaconesses. She dismissed with contempt the arguments put forward by those within the Church of England who opposed the ordination of women stating, in an interview not long before her death, “The doctrine against women priests is hooey, based partly on selective scripture, partly on the Old Testament view of the uncleanness of women at certain times. All in all it makes a pretty funny theological background”. The Times noted that “she certainly felt called to be an invigorating influence sweeping through male-dominated ecclesiasticism with tornado-like force”.⁴⁶

In March 1985 she spoke of the future of the FCFC, explaining that a working party had been considering that subject since September 1983. She pointed out that the women’s department of the FCFC had 47 active local women’s councils, of which 21 were responsible for residential homes. As president of the National Free Church Women’s Council, Elsie had attended one of the Queen’s garden parties at Buckingham Palace and had also been

⁴⁶ Free Church Chronicle (Winter 1983) no 4, vol XXXVIII, 24, (Summer 1984) no 2, vol XXXIX, 8-11, (Spring 1985) no 1, vol XL, 2-3, (Summer 1985) no 2, vol XL, 2-3, Congregational Quarterly (Summer 1991) vol 9, no 2, 12-14, The Daily Telegraph (16 April 1991), The Times (12 April 1991).

present for a long weekend at Canterbury, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury who wished to meet representatives of all the main British denominations, including Cardinal Hume, several Roman Catholic bishops, and other leading church men and women.⁴⁷

Other Activities

In early 1982 Elsie led the prayers of dedication at the opening of the new church building at Belper, in Derbyshire, calling the whole project “a remarkable achievement”. In March 1982 she was the speaker at the Federation of Congregational Women’s meeting at Penge which took as its theme a celebration of the Bible. In the summer of that year she gave the address to the Stratford and District Free Church Council at Long Compton, in Warwickshire. She attended the ordination of Leslie Morrison at Victoria Congregational Church, Blackpool in September 1982, and led the prayers. Two weeks later she was with old friends as the presiding minister at his induction to her former charge in Essex, Hutton Free Church, where he remained until 1987. In April 1983 she gave the charge to the ministers, Elizabeth and Ron Bending, at their induction to the ministry of Corfe Castle Congregational Church, in Dorset. This couple had served as pastors of Chulmleigh Congregational Church 1962-70.⁴⁸

Elsie took seriously her responsibilities as the Congregational Federation’s officer for ecumenical relationships, attending conferences of the British Council of Churches, and encouraging Congregationalists in larger and smaller churches to become involved with other churches and with their local communities. In March 1984 she reported on the failure of the covenant for unity of the English Churches Unity Commission. She stated that this failure had spurred ecumenical efforts at the local level which was, she claimed for the Congregational Federation, “how it should be”. She praised the Bishop of Taunton’s recent address to the CF’s south -west area in which he had stressed that “Unity is a harmony, not unison”. She certainly did not see Free Church ministries as defective, needing to be set right by episcopal ordination. In March 1986 Elsie praised the new approach to ecumenical relations demonstrated in the “Not Strangers But Pilgrims” programme which had been launched by the Archbishop of York in

⁴⁷ Congregational Quarterly (March 1985) vol 3, no 2, 3.

⁴⁸ Congregational News (Jan - Feb) 2, 11, (March - April) 2, (Sept - Oct 1982) 2, (Jan - Feb) 2, (May - June 1983) 3, Chulmleigh Congregational Church Devon (Chulmleigh 1997) 10.

November 1985. In March 1988 she was present at an ecumenical gathering at Swanwick which she found “hopeful”. The delegates included Roman Catholics who met there on equal terms with other Christians in order to plan a new ecumenical instrument to replace the British Council of Churches.⁴⁹

In the Spring of 1985 Elsie was one of 60 who attended the CF’s ministers and pastors school at Swanage in Dorset which she found “stimulating”. That summer she shared in the funeral service for Ron Newman at Old Coulsdon Congregational Church, near Purley, south of London. He had served as minister there for thirty-two years, since the church’s founding in 1953. In the mid-1980s Elsie was instrumental in helping one dissatisfied elder in the United Reformed Church to rediscover his former Congregationalism as a personal member in the Congregational Federation. In the autumn of 1989 Elsie addressed the subject of women in the church. She claimed that the greater number of women in the churches is partially explained by the fact that women live longer than men and she ventured to suggest that men and boys would come to church more if they were given jobs to do, such as painting or gardening. She felt that churches should provide games for men like pool and snooker as well as be friendly to them.⁵⁰ Friends noticed that Elsie was better with women than with men and, in the opinion of one woman minister, she was simply too forceful a personality for most men to cope with.

Elsie’s Death

Elsie did not know how to retire but simply cut back on the many commitments she had previously taken for granted. After 1986 she was minister of only one church, in the Congregational Centre at Nottingham. She continued her involvement in all the church’s activities and would make herself available at all the Congregational Federation’s functions, assemblies, rallies, ministers’ conferences, and at the training weekends for students and tutors alike, with as much vigour as she could muster. However, her health was causing concern and a non-malignant lymphoma, necessitating radium treatment, was initially diagnosed. At Christmas 1990 Elsie did not send cards to all her friends but instead she telephoned them. The sensitive among

⁴⁹ Congregational Quarterly (Nov 1983) vol 1, no 1, 26-28, (March 1984) vol 2, no 1, 10, (March 1986) vol 4, no 1, 43, (March 1988) vol 6, no 1, 20, Free Church Chronicle (Winter 1984) no 4, vol XXXIX, 3-4.

⁵⁰ Congregational Quarterly (June) vol 3, no 2, 18-19, (Sept-Oct 1985) vol 3, no 3, 16, (Autumn 1989) vol 7, no 3, 5.

them realised that she was not well. In early 1991 Elsie was admitted to hospital and, after making a partial recovery, she was discharged. She stayed at the home of Paddy and Henry Morris, enjoying the company and hospitality of these old friends, but was re-admitted to hospital one week before her death on 10 April, 1991 aged 81 years.

The BBC described Elsie after her death in these terms. "For many, she was the symbol of the place women were beginning to occupy in the public ministry of the churches in the post war years. A Congregational Minister, making history in 1946 as the first woman chaplain to the Forces; making history, too, as the first woman presenter of the Daily Service on BBC Radio, where she worked in religious broadcasting for almost thirty years."⁵¹

The funeral and thanksgiving service was held at the Congregational Centre in Nottingham on Thursday, 18 April. It was led by Graham M Adams, the general secretary of the Congregational Federation, and the address was given by John Parker, the chairman of the CF's council. Dorothy Twiss, an RAF chaplain, read the lesson from II Timothy, chapter 4, verses 1-8 and between 200 and 250 people attended, including a representative from the women's branch of the Free Church Federal Council. In his tribute, John Parker recalled her occasional impatience at council meetings with those who rambled or digressed - "Oh, do get on with it", she would say - and her hard work and humility - in working in the cafeteria and bookshop at Nottingham, changing the sheets in the bedrooms, and washing the steps outside the building there. He also spoke of her desire to spread the Christian faith and her urging Congregationalists to engage in "gossiping the gospel". Elsie's body was cremated and her ashes were buried in the garden of remembrance, next to those of her husband, John Garrington, at Greensted, in Essex where he had been the rector.

Four months later a memorial service was held at The City Temple on 31 August, 1991. At this, Janet Wootton officiated, assisted by Irene Blayney and Leslie Morrison. Edwin Robertson, Elsie's friend and colleague from her time with the BBC, gave the address and the Right Honourable Tony Benn MP recalled the unique difficulties, surrounding her appointment as an RAF chaplain, and her courage in these daunting circumstances. Ernest Rea, then head of BBC religious broadcasting at the BBC, led the prayers and Trixie Norcott, Elsie's friend, played the organ. Her nephew, Geoffrey Chamberlain, read from the Jerusalem Bible and the choir of her old school, Channing School for Girls, performed at the service. In addition

⁵¹ J Williams First Lady of the Pulpit (Lewes, Sussex 1993) 71.

refreshments were prepared and served by members of her former church, Hutton Free Church, Essex.⁵²

Tributes

A number of more permanent tributes were deemed appropriate by church members and others whose lives she had affected. On the walls of the chapel at Chulmleigh are several plaques and the church members there decided, one month after Elsie's death, that they wanted to commemorate her by adding one in marble and brass in her memory. Particular friends may wonder whether Elsie herself would approve of this commemoration yet she knew the sincerity of these west country people's feelings. The plaque is situated on the wall to the left of the chapel entrance and it reads,

"We remember The Rev Elsie Chamberlain 1910-1991

Congregational Leader

Minister of this Church 1980-1983

Minister Emeritus

'She hath done what she could' Mark 14. 8"⁵³

The Congregational church members at Castle Gate, Nottingham also chose to honour their friend and minister but in another way. At the church meeting in September 1991 they decided to consult, with the Congregational Federation, about commissioning a portrait of Elsie to be hung on the wall of the sanctuary there.⁵⁴ Although Elsie also may have been embarrassed at the thought of her likeness hanging in the church, it is not inappropriate that this portrait should grace the wall at Castle Gate where the Congregational Federation has its offices. Just three years before her death she wrote, "I am proud of my own now small denomination, that has chosen to remain Congregational and independent".⁵⁵ That pride was mutual. Her fellow Congregationalists, not all uncritically, held her in the highest esteem and felt for her a deep gratitude and love.

Also at Nottingham the acquisition of the adjoining property to the CF centre in Castle Gate, and its refurbishment as offices and meeting rooms, resulted in its being named Elsie Chamberlain House. On October 11, 1997

⁵² *ibid* 91. For Benn and Rea see Who's Who.

⁵³ Chulmleigh Church Minutes - 19 May 1991.

⁵⁴ Nottingham Centre Church Minutes - 10 Sept 1991. The portrait was painted by Roy Porter, the artist who had earlier painted the likeness of Reg Cleaves, also hung at Nottingham.

⁵⁵ J Hibbs *loc cit*.

this was formally opened, at the Congregational Federation's autumn assembly, by Tony Benn, the son of Elsie's great friend, Viscountess Stansgate, herself a distinguished Congregationalist. Among the guests in Nottingham was Elsie's daughter, Janette Williams.⁵⁶

At North Street, Taunton the church has not forgotten Elsie either. A room which opens directly to the outside, at the back of the building, was set aside for use as a charity shop, run by the church members, in Ray Avent's time. This was called 'The Elsie Chamberlain Shop'. More recently, in 2001 this has been refurbished and converted into 'Chamberlains', an attractive coffee shop during the daytime, run by the church. At weekends this becomes a youth cyber café, run by Taunton Youth for Christ, in conjunction with the church. In addition, just inside the entrance to Chamberlains, is a picture of Elsie, with a brief explanation of the café's name.

Elsie as Minister

It would be unfair and misleading to suggest that Elsie Chamberlain regarded herself as superior to and more enlightened than those to whom she ministered. She did not look down upon or stand aloof from those she served. She was not afraid to get her hands dirty and would often help with menial chores in her churches, joining in and adding to the camaraderie of such occasions. If then she was not Lady Bountiful, whose largesse was freely distributed to the deserving poor, was there nevertheless some element of condescension in Elsie's ministry? After all, she was a tall, confident, middle class lady who carried herself well, had a fine bearing, an open smiling face, winning ways and a strong presence, and she came to do good, often to those from less well-off backgrounds. To those who did not know her, Elsie could seem austere, yet she made friends easily and kept deep friendships wherever she went, maintaining them across denominational divides - with Kenneth and Millicent Slack, with Rachel Storr, with several bishops, and with many others. Elsie arranged for friends from New Zealand who had a healing ministry to see Kenneth Slack during his last illness and she herself visited him and prayed with him. She was loved by many and loved readily in return. She had no time to cultivate a condescending graciousness of manner. She was always too busy for that. Perhaps she was also too busy for detailed self-examination, and she was not noted for her deep reflection on issues which others found more complex than she did (indeed she could be impatient with such thinkers).

⁵⁶ The Congregationalist (Feb 1998) no 2, 1.

Some of her church members may have come dangerously close to adoring Elsie, as Elaine Marsh had noticed at Chulmleigh, yet Elsie did not demand adoration, if indeed she recognised it, and many outstanding ministers have had their admiring “worshippers” in the past. Certainly Elsie was aware of her natural authority and of her powers of persuasion and she used them in her ministry, in her attempts to revive small and ailing churches, and in her readiness to befriend all. Her laughter was genuine and infectious. It broke down defences and opened doors for her. Elsie’s lack of vanity was demonstrated in one episode when she was robing before a service in the minister’s vestry, in the company of a young male colleague. The young minister asked if she had a mirror and she replied, “Whatever for?” She simply had no need for a mirror. Although she had once been a dress designer, she had no desire to wear fine clothes nor to preen herself. During one service at Taunton Elsie had slipped as she descended from the pulpit. The church members knew that her shoes which she had bought in a charity shop were simply too big for her. She would not waste money on new shoes if she could buy them more reasonably elsewhere.

Elsie was a good cook but she could be distracted by seemingly more important duties. Staying in the Chulmleigh manse one Sunday when Elaine Marsh was ministering there, she put a pie with a meringue topping in the oven and forgot about it with the result that it was badly overdone. She left the Methodist church hurriedly and rushed back to the house but the pie was baked hard. On another occasion Elsie charred the potatoes when two visiting friends from the Congregational Federation were invited to dinner. She also claimed that she could not make the beautiful jam sponge cakes at which others in her churches excelled.⁵⁷ At Taunton Elsie revealed her frugal approach to good housekeeping when she chastised those who, to her way of thinking, were extravagant in making sandwiches for church teas. Following her mother’s advice, Elsie insisted that the bread only needed butter at the edges. It should not be spread all over the bread.

We may also ask how saintly Elsie was. If she was good, as indeed she undoubtedly was, how good was she? Did she strive for inward peace and spiritual perfection? Given her larger than life presence and early fame, was she truly humble? Certainly she was dedicated to her people and to the God to whom she had given her heart at a young age. She had the old fashioned but understated Christian virtues of loyalty, diligence and reliability. She would not boast and she had no vanity. Her word was her bond and her

⁵⁷ The Bangor Challenge (Los Angeles 1981) 32.

industry and dedication to the cause were exemplary. Her lively mind never stopped wrestling with the problem of communicating the gospel, which is what she had been trying to do all her life, with an uncommon degree of success.

Conclusion

Elsie was not an original thinker. Her intellect was keen but not outstanding. Her gifts lay in her being so much a normal person, with quite extraordinary energy and confidence, that she spoke for others. By speaking plainly and boldly she articulated their fears and misgivings, their hopes and beliefs. Her style was perfectly suited for everyman, the man or woman in the street. Being no scholar, she prepared a simple, essential address and delivered it with vitality and commitment because it came from her heart and came often with her heart. And she would not be intimidated nor overawed. As a woman she had overcome prejudice in being ordained and in gaining acceptance as a minister. She had confronted and overcome the obstacles to her marriage and to her service as an RAF chaplain. Her broadcasting which, in the opinion of many, brought her into full bloom honed her ability to communicate to a mass audience, which probably included many who shunned all things religious. Her varied pastoral experiences demonstrated a singular ability to discover beneath the humdrum and mediocre, so often naturally overlooked, the promise of renewal. Even more exceptionally she was able to convert that promise into reality.

As John Marsh, the former principal of Mansfield College, Oxford wrote in 1991, "To meet and to know Elsie was a liberalising joy. She was a radiant person with a joyful faith".⁵⁸ To those who knew her, whose lives were graced by her wonderful capacity for love, and in her wholehearted acceptance of so many assorted waifs and strays in the churches and beyond, she was unique. In her overwhelming strength, which lasted almost to the end, she was a force of nature, simply unstopplable and wondrous to behold.

Alan Argent

⁵⁸ Reform (May 1991) 18.

A CHURCH WAS BORN

Old Coulsdon Congregational Church - the Early Years 1948-1958

The Germ of the Idea

This is a true story, and like all good stories it has to have a beginning; but where was the beginning and what was it? Was it a God given thought planted in the mind, or a heavenly whisper in the ear from close by? Was it an idea that grew with the passing of time? Whatever it was and however it came, it must have been a powerful thing, full of life and promise, for out of the 'thought' a Church was born!¹

It is not known exactly when the idea first surfaced, because those to whom it came, Fred and Lilian King, are no longer with us, but it must have been sometime in 1948. They were both members of Purley Congregational Church, Surrey although they lived in Old Coulsdon, about three miles away, and they were concerned about the spiritual welfare of the children in the locality whose parents had moved to the neighbourhood since the Second World War, so they approached some of the parents to find out if they would be interested in and if their children would support a Sunday School, were one to come into being. They also visited houses in the area asking the same question.

The Sunday School

As the response was encouraging, the Kings contacted the local education authority to enquire if the hall in the Boys County School could be used on Sunday afternoons. Permission was obtained eventually and the first meeting of the Sunday School was held in October 1948. So the 'thought' was transformed into action! Much help was given by members of the Purley Church, both as leaders and in providing music at a piano which they were allowed to use, and as time went on the use of other rooms was obtained for separate classes. Each Sunday there were trestle tables to move and a screen was formed by placing some tables edgewise on top of

¹ I would like to thank all those who delved into their memories to recall events that took place over half a lifetime ago, also to those far sighted people who kept records of meetings, copies of letters and newspaper cuttings etc. and to Camery Newman for making my writings more readable. Acknowledgements also to the Bourne Society and to the Croydon Local Studies Library for factual information supplied.

others, so as to provide a feeling of togetherness and fellowship in the large hall.

Of course, all had to be taken down at the end of each session and the hall left tidy and shipshape or the unlucky person who called on the caretaker for the key next Sunday would hear about it! No doubt the calling for the key at about 2.30 on a Sunday afternoon - just when they were putting their feet up after Sunday lunch - was not conducive to a warm welcome! We also had complaints about excessive noise sometimes, and on one occasion an adventurous boy brought his roller skates and proceeded to skate along the corridors.

As the years passed the school grew in numbers and more helpers came along. Baptisms were held in the simple surroundings of trestle tables and chairs, conducted by John Weller², the minister of Purley Congregational Church, and later by our own minister, and these events were a great opportunity to explain to parents exactly what Christianity means - it was more than having your child done, as someone described it. So a Cradle Roll was started. One particular little boy loved to call at the home of one of the Sunday School leaders to sit in front of the fire - an old fashioned open fire - and chat, and when asked about going home and wouldn't his parents wonder where he was, replied that it was 'OK'. Was he missing something perhaps? A chart was started to record attendances of different classes and the numbers reached 80 plus, (not that they all came regularly) and it is interesting to see how attendances shot up in the weeks preceding the annual party in the New Year.

Parties and Outings

These parties started in a small way and they were held in the hall of Purley Congregational Church on a Saturday afternoon, the children and helpers travelling by car, as numbers would allow, and the others by bus. As

² The United Reformed Church Year Book (URCYB) has omitted to publish an obituary of John Weller but, from URCYB (1987/88) 181, we learn that he trained for the ministry at Cheshunt College and ministered at Lion Walk, Colchester 1943-51, Purley 1951-62, King's Weigh House (assoc) 1962-65, and Trinity, Wimbledon 1975-80. He served as secretary of the faith and order department of the British Council of Churches 1962-68; and worked for the British and Foreign Bible Society 1968-75. In retirement he gave oversight to Five Oak Green, near Edenbridge, Kent where he was living from 1983 until his death in November 1987.

time went by the children taking part grew in number, and the scope widened. It was good to see the girls in party frocks and the boys with hair neatly brushed - to start with anyway. There were games both energetic and quiet (more or less) and entertainment was provided - conjurers, puppets and professional entertainers, followed by tea.

Purley Church hall is very large and there are big folding screens which can be opened up across the hall or folded back against the walls, so one end of the hall was screened off, behind which helpers would prepare tea out of sight. Trestle tables were placed end to end to form three or four long tables which were covered with goodies, and it was a delight to see so many children tucking into sandwiches and cakes, jelly and ice cream. It was difficult to get the sandwiches eaten before the cakes, generally they ate them the other way round but most of it went in the end! Then it was a mad scramble to get the children dressed and transported home, put all the tables back in place, clean up the kitchen and take away any left-over. It was rather important to get clear of the hall promptly as the Purley Squash Club had a session immediately following the party, so the leaders had to keep their eyes on the clock.

After a time, Summer outings were held which were open to parents and friends. They started off with trips by coach to Hastings and many trips out went to Bognor where a beach hut was rented for the day and packed lunches were taken, often eaten long before lunch time, and sometimes an afternoon tea was provided in a local hall. Generally speaking, the weather was kind for which all were grateful. And so the years passed. Some children came pretty regularly, some only for a short time and then left, and during this time people came to help, some as teachers and some to look after the business side, and thanks are due to all who helped in those early days. Eventually the Sunday School moved into the new Church and changed its name to the Junior Church, so evolving from a separate organisation to become part of the main body of the Church.

Spiritual Provision for Adults

In the meantime, what had the grown-ups been doing? Having seen the Sunday School started, the parents, who had originally come together in a Parents Association to provide some form of spiritual guidance and fellowship for the children, turned their thoughts to the means of providing these things for themselves and others like them in the community. It was decided to begin holding regular Sunday services and they gladly accepted the offer of Miss Martin to use her outside classroom each Sunday. This was

a timber building, forming part of the Downland School owned and run by Miss Martin; it was well lit and heated and was used during the week by a class of her pupils. The first evening service was held here in December 1951. In appreciation of Miss Martin's kind offer, some of the parents came together and redecorated the room throughout, as a token of thanks for this the first meeting place for regular worship of this new group.

Help in taking services was forthcoming from the Surrey Lay Preachers Association who also officiated at the monthly Communion Services. There was a piano so hymns could be sung, and although the numbers attending were small, they were a faithful few. Each Sunday chairs had to be put out and cleared afterwards, so they took it in turns to prepare the room, to provide flowers and to introduce the speaker. Collections were taken and those early balance sheets were very simple indeed, compared with the intricate list of figures on the modern financial statements!

The minister of Purley Congregational Church held week night meetings to give talks on Congregationalism and to advise on the running of the young organisation. The services were simple as may be imagined, but supplied a great need for the adults and were much enjoyed. It was hoped that this also applied to the younger members, but it was somewhat disconcerting to hear one young person remark that he thought that some of the sermons were a bit long, and that he had discovered that if, instead of listening to what was being said, he listened for the buses passing along the road, he could gauge whether the sermon was of a suitable length or a 'bit much'. The buses passed at about twenty minute intervals, so two buses were acceptable but three or even four was not on! But lengthy or not we would have been lost without the faithful help of the lay preachers in those early days.

Growing Organisation

A treasurer was appointed but little other effort was made at organisation for a time and the duties involved in connection with the services and other matters were shared among the members. In the following May a secretary was appointed and a committee formed to consider the formation of a church, as the feeling was that, while they remained a rather indefinable group, they could not expect to make a pronounced impact on the neighbourhood, and would be handicapped in any campaign to attract others, church going folk or not. Also it was important that they become a properly constituted church with definite aims for a church building and a settled ministry.

Methods of making the existence of their meetings known were discussed, and it was agreed that members be asked to exhibit notices outside

their homes giving particulars of services and giving invitations to attend. It was further agreed that a circular letter, including the note of the resolution to form a church, be sent to all who had any connection with the Sunday School or who had attended the evening service at any time. Advertisements were also to be inserted in the local newspaper, advising that services were being held at 202, Coulsdon Road, and that all are welcome.

The Day Nursery

About a year after services were first held in Miss Martin's schoolroom, the committee felt that there was a need to look for larger accommodation for Sunday evening services, and also a need for more suitable premises for the Sunday School. The local Health and Education Authority was approached to enquire if its Day Nursery could be used on Sundays and it was promised that this request would be considered. The Day Nursery is a single storey prefabricated building and is one of many such centres built during the war to care for young children during the day, while their mothers were engaged in war work. The one in Coulsdon Road is now used as a council store depot. Eventually permission was given for members to use this Day Nursery subject to certain provisions, for a rent of 5/- per session, but curiously the request for the Sunday School to use the premises was refused. The first service in the Day Nursery was held on 9th November, 1952 and was conducted by John Weller, at which 36 people were present.

The room used for the services was a large playroom and a rota to prepare the room was drawn up. This involved moving all the toys, both large and small, together with tables and chairs, to another room and lighting the two heating stoves, which were a great source of frustration to those who dealt with them, and which eventually became known by various names, some of which are not repeatable. They had to be lit on Sunday mornings; they used coke for fuel and a gas poker was provided, but it was generally found better to take wood and possibly some coal along to get the fires going. It was necessary to return in the afternoon to check that the fires were still alight, for more often than not, one or both would have gone out. Then they had to be out, relaid and relit and thereafter frequent visits were necessary to make sure that the room was warm enough for the evening services. Roll on Summer!

Now the members were getting more organised. One of the number was responsible for providing music each Sunday. The lay preachers continued to give welcome help, and bazaars and other fund raising events were held to help with finance for a church building.

The Church's Foundation

Then early in 1953, a hope which had been cherished for many years was realised when the Old Coulsdon Congregational Church was formed by covenant, on 24th January at Purley Congregational Church. 23 founder members from Old Coulsdon, together with four members of the Purley Church who transferred their membership to the new church were present, supported by "a large congregation gathered from churches in the district". The service was conducted by the moderator of the southern province of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, Revd. William Andrew James, a Welshman, who had himself been the minister at Purley 1945-50 and who still lived there. James was assisted by his successor in the Congregational church at Purley, Revd John Weller and also by Revd Stanley S Shrubsole, secretary of the Surrey Congregational Union. The members of the new church made the following covenant:

We do here, in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ solemnly give ourselves to Him and to each other in Covenant, promising to walk with God and one another in all privileges and duties of Church fellowship, worship and service as He shall direct and enable us .

Andrew James gave the charge to the new church and, at the communion service later, John Weller gave the right hand of fellowship to the new members.

An informal meeting in the hall afterwards was chaired by the president of the Surrey Congregational Union for 1953, Mr. R P Smith, and greetings and good wishes were conveyed by the chairman of the Coulsdon & Purley Urban District Council, and by ministers of neighbouring churches, including the rector of Old Coulsdon, which were responded to by the secretary of the new church, F S Clayton. Soon after this milestone, regular deacons' meetings were started and continued at monthly intervals in the homes of members.³

A Church Building

Meanwhile, thoughts had been turning to the provision of a church

³ The Christian World Feb 5 1953. R P Smith was secretary of a group of 10 churches in and around Guildford from about 1936-54 when he continued as secretary of the main Guildford church - Congregational Year Books (CYBs)1936-1954. For Revd W. Andrew James see URCYB (1976) 299-300.

building some time in the future, and information was given to the effect that a site for the proposed church had been bought by the Congregational Union in 1942 for the sum of £1,750, and the site was on the piece of land at the corner of Cannons Hill and Coulsdon Road, where a bungalow named Elmcroft once stood, the postal address of which was 103 Coulsdon Road. This property had been destroyed during the war by an high explosive. bomb dropped on 1st, December 1940, when thankfully no-one had been was killed but some people were injured. The purchase price would be offset by a claim for war damage of £500.

Early in 1952 a notice board was placed on the site at Cannons Hill, to the effect that this was the proposed site for the new Congregational Church. Interestingly this announcement was received with considerable adverse criticism from local residents. The then rector of St. John's Church agreed that a nonconformist church was an urgent necessity in the district but, understandably, he felt that the propagation of the gospel in Old Coulsdon would be carried out better by having churches at opposite ends of the village. Subsequently, a house to house enquiry was conducted (primarily to prepare a report for the church extension committee), as to the need for a nonconformist church in the district. The result was that critical views, similar to the rector's, were made by a number of residents.

At about this time a letter was received, from the Coulsdon & Purley Urban District Council, enquiring whether the Church would sell the Cannons Hill site to them for the erection of a library or community centre. The deacons sensibly replied that if a suitable alternative site could be found, then the request would be considered. The adverse local feeling was discussed at some length at a deacons' meeting, held early in 1952 with John Weller in the chair, when it was felt that local opposition was sufficiently strong to be a deterrent to the future prosperity of the proposed church, and that consideration be given to a piece of land at nearby Lacey Green.

An Alternative Site

The site at Lacey Green consisted of land, with a frontage along Coulsdon Road of 239 feet, and a depth down Tollers Lane of 160 feet, which at the present time would represent the land upon which five bungalows have been built in Coulsdon Road, and which would extend back to the Shaw Home for the Elderly. This site therefore was approximately twice as large as the Cannons Hill Site. This alternative site, located at the opposite end of the village, would spread the effect of Christian work over a wider area, with special reference to that part of the district then being

developed; also in this locality there were a greater number of children, many of whom already attended the Sunday School. It was also noted that the house called The Shaw was on land adjoining in Tollers Lane, and this would have made an ideal manse.

It was recommended that the Cannons Hill site be offered to the council for their building, and that the church purchase the Lacey Green site, and also that an approach be made to the council for financial assistance, in order to facilitate the erection of a new church hall, in return for their use of the new premises on weekdays for their community centre. The asking price for the Lacey Green site was £1,700, which included all standing timber, meaning that there were trees on the site. The owner was quite willing to sell to the church.

The Village Scene

Not so many years ago, there was a pond on Lacey Green on the other side of Tollers Lane, at the junction with Coulsdon Road, and on the opposite side of Coulsdon Road stood a smithy where a garage is now sited, and it is within living memory that the blacksmith was kept busy attending to the many horses of the traffic that passed along the road. Round about were fields where houses now stand, and the smithy was eventually demolished about 60 years ago (in the 1940s). Although this may appear to have little to do with the church's story, it is important to set the scene and to remind readers that the expansion of London has absorbed many of the outlying villages which retained their attractive and distinctive character until recently. The pace of change in the Old Coulsdon district has been rapid, although it is true that Old Coulsdon itself still preserves much of its village atmosphere.

Negotiations continued throughout the year, and early in 1953 it was reported by the secretary that discussions regarding a change of site for the proposed building had come to nothing. There is no official record of what took place at the negotiations, nor why the final decision to revert to the Cannons Hill site was taken. However, it was the opinion of the committee that every opportunity, afforded by the plot of ground on the Cannons Hill and Coulsdon Road corner, should be taken as the site was in a very prominent and central position in the village. The parents association gave its wholehearted support to building on this site.

The Cannons Hill Site

Now that the site for the new church had definitely been established, it was realised that the ground was being used as a short cut from Cannons Hill

to Coulsdon Road and that a definite path had been worn across the site. There was concern that a right of way might conceivably be established if this were allowed to continue without check. A temporary barrier was therefore erected across the path for one day each year - on December 26th.

At about the time that services were first held in Miss Martin's schoolroom, a building committee was formed to consider the erection of a building and to make application for a grant from the Forward Movement⁴ of the Congregational Union. This committee consisted of three representatives from the Surrey extension committee, three representatives from the Purley diaconate and three from the parents association. The committee worked extremely well; the members from the Surrey extension committee took care mainly of negotiations at county level, and the others concerned themselves with local proceedings. The whole committee was kept informed of all events and decisions, and worked together in fund raising efforts. The activities of this committee are recorded later in the story.

A Minister for the New Church

Soon after the first deacons' meeting in April 1953, John Weller suggested that the church should consider the appointment of a full time minister, and also that a joint pastorate with Caterham Hill Congregational Church be kept in mind, as Caterham Hill, only one or two miles away, was also at that time without a minister. Both John Weller and the moderator had made enquiries at the ministerial training colleges for a suitable person, and eventually the moderator recommended that a Mr Newman of Western College, Bristol should be invited to preach.

The moderator had stated that Newman had shown an interest in the situation in this district and desired a sphere of work that was pioneering in nature. He had also spoken in commendation of Newman's preaching and pastoral qualifications, quoting the principal of Western College, Dr H F Lovell Cocks. Ronald Newman was subsequently invited to preach, on the 14th March at Caterham Hill and on the 28th March at Old Coulsdon in the day nursery.

He later attended a meeting of the deacons of both churches together with the ministers of Purley and Caterham Valley churches, when questions were asked on both sides, and a full and frank discussion took place. As a result of this meeting and a subsequent church meeting, Ronald Newman was

⁴ For the Forward Movement see R T Jones Congregationalism in England 1662-1962 (1962) 400-1.

invited to accept the pastorate of Old Coulsdon and Caterham Hill Churches, together with the chaplaincy of St. Lawrence's Hospital, to which he agreed and he commenced his ministry in the following September.

Ron Newman

When Ernest Ronald Newman first came to Old Coulsdon as minister, his wife Camery came with him. They were literally newly-weds, having been married just one week previously, so starting out on married life together and also beginning a new ministry, they could truly be described as pioneers, setting up home at 15, Sunny Rise, Caterham. Both Ron and Camery, as they soon became affectionately known, were understood to be kind and compassionate people to whom one could talk easily and be assured of a sympathetic hearing. Ron had a fine sense of humour and a great capacity for hard work, which was just as well considering that he had two churches to care for, as well as the chaplaincy of St. Lawrence's Hospital. In fact this heavy load eventually took its toll and he had to rest up for a time in hospital at The Dene, Caterham.

At first, Ron had no transport of his own, except a powered bicycle (Cyclemaster) and it was necessary to arrange for him to be taken to and from services and other activities in Old Coulsdon. Subsequently he acquired a second hand Austin which Camery named Belinda. Some of the church members helped Ron to learn to drive so that he was able to pass his driving test in due course.

Ron Newman was ordained a short time later, on the 14th October 1954 at Caterham Valley Congregational Church, when the charges were given by the principal of Western College and Revd W J Downes, tutor and bursar there, and the moderator of the southern province presided. Among others taking part were Revds A W Harrison, J G Weller, L M Wheeler, Mr R E Sankey and Mr W H Holden (church secretaries of Caterham Hill and Old Coulsdon respectively). Caterham Valley Church is a large building and it was full to overflowing, the service was inspiring and the singing was described as "fantastic". Tea was served afterwards when short speeches were given by local civic and church representatives.⁵

Deacons' meetings continued to be held in members' homes and church meetings were now held in the cafe above Oliver's shop on the corner of

⁵ The Christian World Oct 21 1954, CYB (1955) 487. For Downes ("Uncle Bill" to his students who held him in high esteem - a fine Greek scholar) see CYB (1988-9) 28-29.

Placehouse Lane and Coulsdon Road (when the cafe was closed, of course) and continued there until October 1956, when the premises changed hands. Early consideration was given to the minister's stipend, and in the beginning the most that Old Coulsdon Church could contribute was £117 10s p.a., the recommended minimum being £320 at that time. The remainder being made up by Caterham Hill Church and the Home Churches Fund of the Congregational Union.

The New Building

Ron now joined the building committee, and the first thoughts as to the type of building to be erected tended towards a dual purpose building, consisting of a hall with a sanctuary at one end which could be screened off for secular events and opened up for worship etc. Provision would be made for classrooms, a kitchen and toilets. Three such buildings were visited by members of the committee, one at Mill Hill, in north London (Congregational) and two at Debden in Essex (one Congregational and one Anglican).

A firm of architects was appointed, Mountford Piggott and Partners of Kensington, London, to prepare preliminary plans, and members of the committee visited the architects' office to look at some pencil sketches. The church was fortunate that Mr. Piggott took a personal interest in our project and, during the next few months, various schemes were prepared and shown to members but no one scheme seemed to arouse any special enthusiasm. Towards the end of this time, the members of the church extension committee asked the Old Coulsdon church to reconsider its proposals and suggested that a church proper should be built first, costing no more than £10,000, with a hall to be added later. This request was taken on board.

At the end of 1955, when members were somewhat concerned at the small amount of money in the building fund, they were overjoyed to learn that Ron Newman had made contact with a lady whom, he had learnt, was giving money away. She had called on him at Sunny Rise and showed an interest in our efforts, with the result that she gave Mr Newman a cheque for £2,000 for the building fund, which amazed him and also, in turn, the church members, when they heard about it. This altered the whole aspect of the fund and provided just the boost needed to raise the morale of the members. This gift was anonymous at the time but, after the lady died, it became known that she was Mrs. Broomfield of bakery fame.

At a subsequent meeting of the committee, the architect's representative put forward an unconventional scheme to see if it would meet

with approval. This was for an octagonal building with both a vestry and a classroom attached. As well as being suitable for the somewhat restricted site, the design had a pleasing historical link, being in the shape of the old Congregational meeting houses of the 17th century. After the initial surprise, this scheme met with enthusiastic approval and the members felt that this was indeed the right idea. It was later unanimously approved by the church meeting, and copies were sent to the Surrey church extension committee.

A further revised plan, incorporating small amendments, was prepared and submitted to the local authority for planning approval. Apart from the odd sketch, this was the seventh scheme put forward. The architect also prepared a scale model, in accordance with the accepted scheme, and this model, after playing an important part in fund raising, is still with the church. Mr. Piggott was thanked by the committee for his sympathetic and painstaking approach, to what was to him, a small project.

Raising Funds

Members of the building committee took it in turns to visit churches in Surrey and Kent to show a film strip and the model and to give a brief description of the project, and to appeal for financial help. There is a record of ten churches visited and there may well have been more, some large and some small, but it was a worthwhile effort and as a result a large sum was added to the building fund. The amount of cash continued to grow with proceeds from bazaars, especially a very successful 'Treasure Island' event, held in St. John's Hall. Other sources of income included fetes, gifts, interest free loans, the ladies' sewing party efforts, and a birthday fund whereby members gave a special donation on their birthdays, so the secretary of the building committee was able to report that by the end of 1956 the sum of £9,388 would be available.

In 1957 the project was put out to tender and in September prices were received, the lowest being that from Mansell Ltd., of Croydon, in the sum of £12,545. However, the building committee decided that no contract should be placed until this amount could be foreseen, as a gap of £2,500 still existed. Ways and means were discussed for reducing the cost. It was subsequently reported that the church was to receive £2,500 from the sale of the Congregational church building at nearby Addiscombe, so a contract was signed on 25th October 1957 and building commenced shortly thereafter on the 9th December. It was a great thrill to see the bulldozers at work on the site at last after all the years of working, planning and anxiety.

The Church Develops

During the time that the building committee had been busy fund raising and discussing plans with the architect, the church moved out of the day nursery and started to hold services in St. John's Hall, by kind permission of the rector of the parish church, the first service being held on 2nd January 1955.

This new accommodation was a great improvement on the day nursery, having gas heaters so that the members would no longer have to put up with the inconveniences of the previous couple of years or so. The church had held socials in the hall for some time, and these continued to be held there. The nominal rent charged for the hall was £3 5s per quarter, and there the church stayed until the new building was ready.

Construction work on the foundations of the new building made good progress in spite of the weather, so that the stone laying ceremony could now be organised, and on Saturday, 22nd February 1958 the foundation stone was laid. All that could be seen of the building at that time, was the concrete floor slab with a small portion of the external wall built up enough to take the stone. It was a very cold wintry day, living up to February's reputation for uncomfortable weather, and it was snowing. One local newspaper carried the report that over 200 people braved a blinding snowstorm to attend the short ceremony on the site - a piece of reporter's licence perhaps - but a most unpleasant day weather-wise nevertheless.

The stone was well and truly laid by the founding church secretary, F S Clayton who had since retired to Poole, Dorset. Among those present were the minister and Revds H M Herbert (rector of St. John's Church), John Weller, Stanley Shrubsole and the southern province moderator. After the ceremony at the site was over, those invited made their way across the green to St. John's Hall for a service, conducted by the moderator, with a sermon preached by John Weller, followed by refreshments, when greetings were expressed by some of the distinguished guests, including the president of the Surrey Congregational Union (Revd Frank Shield) and the chairman of the Coulsdon & Purley Urban District Council (Councillor Corsil JP). A collection in aid of the church building fund amounted to £42 10s.⁶

Having accepted the responsibility, the ladies, who always came up trumps where catering was concerned, were faced with quite a problem, that is how to provide refreshments for a hall full of people from a very small

⁶ The Christian World Feb 5 1958. Frank Chapman Shield was minister of Woking Congregational Church 1946-63 - see URCYB (1987/88) 199.

kitchen. However, this problem had been foreseen, and it was solved by arranging the food on paper plates and placing cardboard rings approximately 2" high on each plate, to take the next plate, and so on to provide a tier of five or six plates, which could be carried to the ends of rows of seating and passed along, someone's bright idea. Tea posed another problem but trays were used for this.

Church Growth

As already stated the church was founded with 27 members. By October 1953 when the figures were returned for the first entry in the Congregational Year Book (1954) it had risen to 35 with 40 Sunday school scholars 12 teachers and one lay preacher. During the period we are looking at, the membership rose steadily to 54 with 2 lay preachers whilst the number of scholars tended to fluctuate more, at one point reaching 107! Credit for growth goes to the church members and to Ron Newman. In 1958 he left the pastorate of Caterham Hill to concentrate entirely on Old Coulsdon and remained minister there until his eventual retirement in 1983. He died in August 1985.

The need for a church at Old Coulsdon may be seen from the general trend of an expanding population in the area which was increasingly becoming a suburb of London. The support of John Weller for the cause is commendable when, during the same period, the church membership at Purley (similarly becoming more and more suburban) rose from 668 to 750. One might have thought he had enough to worry about. Is there any significance in the fact that the two smaller churches, Old Coulsdon and Caterham Hill, joined the Congregational Federation (as did Ron Newman's former tutor, Bill Downes) whilst the big one at Purley joined the URC?⁷

Opening the New Building

So we come to the last great event in this story, the opening and dedication of the church building. The building was finished, the cash had been raised, miraculously, (although debts were to be paid off) and it was a lovely day in more ways than one. Saturday, 4th October it was, ten years after the first meeting of the Sunday School. A great many people were there to witness the ceremony and to give thanks.

The ceremony started at 3.00pm when the deacons, the officers of the church, the minister, the architect and the builder's representative

⁷ CYBs 1953-59. For Ernest Ronald Newman see CYB (1986-7) 26.

accompanied the moderator to the external door of the church, which he opened, saying,

To the glory of God I open the doors of this Church. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise. Give thanks unto Him and bless His name.

As the moderator passed through the inner doors he paused and said

Peace be to this house and all who worship therein. Peace be to those that enter and to those that go out therefrom. Peace be to those that love it and love the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Then the service of dedication followed. Among those taking part were John Weller (who was at this time also chairman of the eastern district of the county union); Mr L G Whiteman (secretary of the Surrey Union) and Stanley S Shrubsole who preached.⁸

During the evening of that same day, a social was held in St. John's Hall and Sunday services, both morning and evening, were commenced in the new church the next day. Now the church had its members, a full time minister, and it had its "home". This is the end of the beginning, but not the end of the story, for the story goes on...

Not many names have been mentioned herein, just a few of the VIPs - although those who were there at the beginning will know who they are - and they share in the Glory - and they are privileged people - for how many can say "*I was there when a Church was born*"?

Harold Cocks

⁸ The Christian World Oct 16 1958.

JOHN STOUGHTON'S MS AUTOBIOGRAPHY AT DR WILLIAMS'S LIBRARY¹

In an article, published in the Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society,² in the mid 20th century, Geoffrey Nuttall described how a set of illuminating documents from nonconformist ministers came to be collected by the then librarian of Dr Williams's Library, the Unitarian minister, Thomas Hunter, in the 1870s.³ Hunter wrote in 1874.

"I propose making an effort towards a MSS collection of biographies of the existing Non-conformist ministry in connection with Churches of Puritan lineage by appealing to each individual for a sketch, long or short as it may please him of the leading events of his life. to be permanently deposited in Dr Williams's Library for future reference the such as desire to consult them... An authentic record of the men now engaged in upholding the principles of Protestantism protest and liberty, so much identified for upwards of two eventful centuries with English Nonconformity, would be of special interests and facilitate the labours of the future biographer or historian."⁴

The response to the appeal in the following year produced only 74 replies from various ministers.

In the same article Geoffrey Nuttall transcribed a short and 'disappointing account' of the biographical sketch, submitted by the famous Congregational minister of the City Temple, London, Joseph Parker (1830-1902).⁵ Nuttall wrote that the replies of John Stoughton and H R Reynolds would be transcribed in the Transactions at a future date.⁶ This does not appear to have happened. Therefore I have transcribed Stoughton's manuscript but first offer a summary of Stoughton's life.

¹ For access to the MS, here described, and for permission to publish, thanks is due to the Dr David Wykes and the staff of Dr Williams's Library.

² G F Nuttall "MS Autobiographies at Dr. Williams's Library" CHST XVI (1949-1951) 108-112 .

³ Dr Williams's Library Ms 38-64. Records of Non-conformity.

⁴ T Hunter in the Inquirer [a Unitarian newspaper] December 12th 1874.

⁵ Nuttall loc cit.

⁶ Nuttall loc cit.

A Summary of Stoughton's Life

John Stoughton (1807-1897)⁷ was born in Norwich on the 18th of November 1807. He was the son of Thomas Stoughton, himself the son of an admiral, and his wife Sarah Bullard, daughter of the master of the Norwich mental asylum (the Bethel Hospital) James and his wife Sarah.⁸ Thomas Stoughton, a lawyer, died when the boy was five years' old, but Sarah, his mother, a Quaker, taught him to read and sent him to Norwich Grammar School. Until he was twenty years' old, he was a clerk in the office of a Roman Catholic lawyer.⁹ Having studied religion, as he writes in the manuscript, two ministers recommended him to go to college; his pastor at the Old Meeting House, Norwich, John Boutet Innes (1784-1837), according to Stoughton, 'a man of a considerable power ... and I loved and honoured him as an intimate friend', and the minister of Norwich's second Independent church, the Tabernacle, built not as 'the result of a secession but through the awakening effect of John Alexander'¹⁰ who was one of the founders of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, and in 1853, its chairman.¹¹

He attended Highbury College 1828-1832. In Reminiscences, Stoughton described his tutors:- Dr William Harris, the theological tutor, Dr Henderson, 'an accomplished Hebraist',¹² Dr H. F. Burder (1783-1864) 'his teacher of homiletics' and Dr Robert Halley (1806-1876), his classical tutor, 'impulsive,' and 'unsystematic'.¹³ Professor John Hoppus (1787-1875), the first holder of the chair of Mind and Logic in 1829 at University College, London was also a Congregational minister.¹⁴ Stoughton was ordained at Windsor Congregational Church¹⁵, by the Revd Alexander Redford and the

⁷ for Stoughton see Dictionary of National Biography (DNB) and Congregational Year Book (CYB) (1898) 204-206.

⁸ G K Lewis A Short Record of a Long Life (1898) 5.

⁹ DNB.

¹⁰ J Stoughton Reminiscences of Congregationalism 50 Years Ago (1881) 7.

¹¹ For Innes see C E Surman's Index of Congregational Ministers, held at Dr Williams's Library, London.

¹² Stoughton op cit 14ff.

¹³ J Stoughton Recollections of a Long Life (1894) 17.

¹⁴ For the controversy concerning the appointment of John Hoppus to UCL see entries of John Hoppus and George Grote in DNB. For Hoppus see CYB (1876).

¹⁵ J Stoughton Congregationalism in the Court Suburb (1883).

two worked together in the pastorate until Redford's death.¹⁶ Stoughton left Windsor in 1843 to begin a long and happy pastorate at Kensington Chapel. He left Kensington in the 1870s to become a tutor at New College, London. In his obituary in the Congregational Year Book of 1898, he is spoken of as 'the embodiment of Nonconformity in its best Sunday clothes' and 'the Father of the denomination'. Presumably mimicking the epithet attached to Gladstone, he is also described as the 'Grand Old Man of Nonconformity'.

The manuscript is fairly legible although sometimes words are linked by a stroke of the pen. It is hard to distinguish whether some of the initial letters are upper or lower case. Two insertions in the margin are here reproduced in italics; and interlined insertions are here given in bold type. Words and letters crossed out in the ms have been included.

The Manuscript

Dr John Stoughton

I was born in the City of Norwich on the 18th of Nov^r 1807. My father was a solicitor, & went by the name of "the honest Lawyer"; but died when I was between 4 & 5 years of age, leaving a widow, & three children in straitened circumstances. He connected himself with the Wesleyan denomination, but retained an attachment to the Church of England, expressing a desire that I might become a minister of that Communion. My Mother had been brought up a member of the Society of Friends; & early circumstances threw me into connection, not only with both Conformists & non conformists **but** & with Roman Catholics also - a fact which has had an influence on my character, disposing me to cultivate a spirit of a moderation & candour, and to seek friendly intercourse with Christians of every name.

I went to School at Norwich & Yarmouth; & when about 14, entered a Solicitors' office. I remained a Clerk till I was nearly 20, working hard in various branches of study. After becoming decidedly religious, I determined to devote myself to the christian ministry. Having left the Methodists, amongst whom I received my earliest spiritual impressions, I became member of the Independent Church in the old Meeting Ho^{se}, Norwich, under ~~of~~ the pastoral care of the Rev^d J B Innes. I was by him, & the Rev^d John Alexander, recommended to Highbury College which I entered in 1828 - & remained there until 1833, under the tutorship of Dⁿ W Harrison -

¹⁶ Surman's index: Alexander Redford (1759-1840). Father of George Redford CYB (1861), a daughter married a William Harris CYB (1857).

Henderson, Burder & Halley. In connection with the studies at Highbury, an arrangement was made for the admission of the young men to the philosophical class at University College, then supervised by professor Hoppus. of that arrangement I availed myself.

In 1831 I received an invitation from an Indep^l the Church at Ipswich & also from the Church at Windsor, the latter of which I accepted, upon condition of remaining at Highbury another year. I went to reside at Windsor in 1832; and in 1833, a new Chapel built upon my accepting the pastorate, was opened, & I was ordained in it after-wards, by the Revd Alex^r Redford, my beloved Senior Colleague in the pastorate, & other ministers.

The Congregation greatly enlarged - At that time there was no evening worship in the parish Church, & many of the members of the Establishment attended Chapel - a circumstance which led to the institution of evening services in Windsor & Eton - Controversies arose, but my relations to the Clergy were always friendly; & after the passing of the Reform Bill, & the accession of Her present Majesty, the political and social influence of Dissent in the Royal Borough increased. Some of the Queens servants attended Chapel & the Mayor of the Town, at the time of the Queen's Marriage being a member of my Congregation, I was appointed by the Town's people as one of the persons to present an address to Her Majesty. We were received at the first Levee after the Marriage; & the appearance of a Dissenting Minister at Court in those days, was somewhat of a novelty. I became Sole pastor of the Church on the death of Mr Redford, & remained so until 1843. - Overtures from other Churches were made to me before that period; but when the Church at Kensington, upon the removal of Dr Vaughan to Manchester Indep^l College, invited me to succeed him, I felt it my ~~from~~ duty to accept the position. I was recognised as pastor in the month of Nov.^r, & the Congregation increasing, steps were taken within a Year afterwards, for enlarging the Chapel, & School rooms, at an expense of 1800£. In the Year 1848, it was resolved to build a New Chapel at Bayswater; & to plant there, a new Church of such members as lived in that neighbourhood. - In this way, 50 Communicants & nearly 200 seat holders swarmed ~~of~~ from the parent hive.

The Congregation at Kensington continuing to increase, it was resolved in 1853, to erect a much more commodious chapel at Kensington. *it accommodates 1200*. This was done. The building from first to last, and the new School Rooms subsequently erected, cost about £14, 000

Not long after my settlement at Kensington, I was elected a Trustee of

the Coward property for the education of Ministers & other religious objects, & in that capacity, became active in promoting the union of the three Colleges of Homerton, Highbury & Coward. On the death of Dr Jno Harris ¹⁷, I was invited to the principalship of New College, but declined. - When Dr Halley resigned *his Theological professorship* however, I was induced to accept the Chair of Historical Theology.

I received my degree at Edinburgh in the Year 1869 at the installation of the New Chancellor Lord Justice General Inglis.¹⁸

I visited the Holy Land in 1866 & America in 1873.

Owing to my not being able to obtain a Colleague in the pastorate, so as to receive the confidence of all the people, I have seen it right to resign my office at Kensington, much to the present grief of all parties - but I hope in declining years to continue my work at New College, & by occasional preaching, & literary occupation to promote the diffusion of the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour.

John Stoughton DD Edin.

Jan^y 1875

¹⁷ John Harris (1802-1856) was Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology at Cheshunt College, Cambridge 1837, principal of New College, London, 1851. He died suddenly. See DNB.

¹⁸ For John Inglis, Lord Glengorse (1810-1891) see DNB.

OBITUARY

Alan Tovey 1942-2002

Alan Tovey was born in 1942 in the small Welsh village of Hafodyrynys, to the north of Newport. He trained for the ministry at Memorial College, Swansea between 1961 and 1964 before moving on to Mansfield College, Oxford, where he studied between 1964 and 1968, being awarded an MA in 1971. His first employment came with IVF (later the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) as travelling secretary for Wales between 1969 and 1974. It was in 1974 that he was called to the ministry of the Gospel at Latimer Memorial Congregational Church in Beverley, East Yorkshire. He is remembered there as a faithful pastor, especially among the young people, providing a warm consecutive biblical ministry. Over the years Alan would find freedom from interruption at the many coffee shops around Beverley, giving him the opportunity to work in peace away from the telephone.

In 1989 Alan was called to become the first full-time General Secretary of An Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches, a position he held right up to his death. He was ideally suited to the task. He represented EFCC on the various Congregational bodies effectively. The Cheshunt College governors especially valued his thoughtful contribution. He was also a gracious and kind man, able to be on warm, friendly terms even with those with whom he had profound theological disagreements. It was his guidance that led to several developments within EFCC that have quietly advanced the cause of evangelical Congregationalism.

Being a quiet man, and because of his interest in church history, especially the Elizabethan Separatists and the Puritans, he was considered by some to be an academic. He utterly refuted the idea. He was not interested in study for the sake of knowledge alone. For him history was a way of learning where the church had gone wrong in the past and of benefitting from those mistakes, so that they are not made again. In a review article which he wrote on various works by Peter Newman Brooks in Foundations, the theological journal of the British Evangelical Council, (No 31, Autumn 1993, p. 47), he quotes Brooks' comment approvingly: 'It is a sad fact that increasing numbers of otherwise intelligent Christians neither have nor seek a sense of their own history as members of the Church of God'. Alan was a sharp thinker and in conversation always gave his hearer something to think about.

He published several articles and book reviews in Journals, especially on

REVIEWS

Radical Christian Writings: A Reader. Edited by Andrew Bradstock and Christopher Rowland. Pp xxvi, 350. Blackwell Publishers, 2002. HB £60 ISBN 0-631-22249-9, PB £17.99 ISBN 0-631-22250-2.

As the editors state, this is not a collection of writings on “grassroots Christianity” but rather it is a set of radical writings on Christian political thought. Of course, the difficulty comes with definition. Who or what constitutes radical? Jesus, we might all agree, was radical and, if he sets the standard, who can measure up? Who else deserves that appellation? In this collection we are offered some 63 sets of writings, of which almost half are drawn from the twentieth century and only 3 derive from the period before the 12th century. Perhaps this bias towards the recent past is only to be expected because it is easier to agree on what we consider radical, in more recent years, whereas the early Christians are more remote and correspondingly are more difficult to assess. It is also true that simply more writings survive from recent years than from the early Christian period, giving the editors more to choose from in the twentieth century. Perhaps predictably about half of the extracts are by British writers but that leaves half from overseas, from whom there is much to learn.

Some writers who are included are better known than others. Gerrard Winstanley has been made much of for twenty or thirty years now, by Marxist historians like Christopher Hill and others, with no Christian agenda at all, and Winstanley has eight extracts from his writings included here, whereas most of his fellow radicals have only one. William Blake, the artist and poet, and John Milton, both clearly far from unknown, and the latter the subject of Hill’s writings, each have three extracts.

John Ball, Jan Hus, the Lollards, Savonarola, Thomas Muntzer, the Family of Love, the Anabaptists, the Levellers and Joseph Arch, all included, would qualify as radicals to most informed people and would be uncomfortable members of any church. However some readers might be surprised to find, in the company of Martin Luther King, Steve Biko and Oscar Romero, John Bunyan who satirizes the complacent Christian in The Pilgrim’s Progress and Charles Haddon Spurgeon who writes in favour of disestablishment of the Church. The largest chapter included is that concerned with the Kairos Document (1985) which provided a theological comment on the political situation in South Africa. Several women writers are included, among them Marguerite Porete (died 1310), Argula von

Grumbach of the early 16th century, Anna Trapnel, Priscilla Cotton, Mary Cole, and Anne Wentworth of the 17th century, the 19th century American campaigner Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others from more recent times.

This is a fascinating collection of radical and political Christian perspectives, many from writers and thinkers judged heretical by the mainstream but by no means all. Each extract is accompanied by a brief introduction, explanatory notes and a bibliography. The book offers an easy introduction to subversive Christian thought through the ages and should be a welcome addition to the shelves of thoughtful Congregationalists whose history includes many forays into radical activity, as well as to Christians of all denominations. Readers of this magazine might have nominated a few more Congregationalists for the collection (John Howard the prison reformer and Benjamin Waugh who pioneered work to prevent cruelty to children are obvious candidates) but that's a different exercise.

However, I fear that the book is unlikely to stimulate discussion of these ideas "in the seminar room, the pew, the house-group and the pub", as the editors wish. I do wonder whether it could become a useful work for a church study group and I should be keen to know what effect such study might have on sermons and church meetings. I would also contend that several of these radicals do not need to be placed "on the theological map", as the editors hope, because they have been there for many years. Justin, Cyprian and Pelagius, from the first four and a half centuries of the church, for instance, are necessarily studied in any course on the early church. Therefore it is easy to exaggerate the "omission" from which, claim the editors, the writers included in this collection have suffered.

Yet this is a worthwhile production and I recommend it to those concerned for the radical political tradition in the Church. Here are the distilled ideas of radical Christian activists in an easy reading format.

Studies in English Dissent. By G F Nuttall. Pp xii, 362. Quinta Press, Meadow View, Quinta Crescent, Weston Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire, England, SY10 7RN, 2002. £30. ISBN 1-897856-14-8.

Be not deceived. Yes, this is a new book by the 91 years old Geoffrey Nuttall but they are not new essays. Rather we have here a compilation of articles and lectures which first appeared elsewhere, some in relatively inaccessible publications and probably all out of print. But this book is

vintage Nuttall and it is welcome. He is at home among the sources of English Dissenting history, as few others have ever been. Geoffrey Nuttall is a meticulous historian who sympathetically but critically examines aspects of Dissenting history, from within the company of believers. His interest is in the community of faith, the gathered church and its beliefs, the Dissenting academy, and the Nonconformist ministers. Unlike many of those who study church history in our day, he is neither primarily concerned with sociology nor with the numerical decline of church attendances, but in Christian faith and its witness and, given his own faith, his perceptions are the truer and sharper. He never treats the churches as if they are curious relics of the distant past for they have their living counterparts still. Indeed Congregationalism and its history are the air in which he lives and breathes.

The sixteen essays are mainly concerned with 17th and 18th century Dissent although the last in the collection reproduces two lectures, given at the closure of New College, London and the subsequent transfer of much of the college's library to Dr Williams's Library, and, therefore, the reader is led into the highways and byways of 19th century history. Again, although the title directs us to English Dissent, the essays do not have a narrow focus. 'The Significance of Trevecca College' reminds English readers that the Evangelical Revival, through this important college in rural Wales, 'a School of the Prophets', influenced both English and Welsh church life. His 'Continental Pietism and the Evangelical Movement in Britain' discovers the links between vital religion on the European continent in the 18th century and evangelicals in Britain (again not England alone). 'Methodism and the Older Dissent' concentrates on the awakening among Dissenters and examines the response of Dissenters to the rise of Methodism.

Among the articles included we find the useful 'Congregational Commonwealth Incumbents' which dates from 1943, and covers a subject still insufficiently explored. I was surprised by this paper when I discovered it first in the early 1970s and am delighted to see it reproduced here. All students of Congregationalism will be pleased to have again in print Nuttall's 'The Principles of Congregationalism in their Historical Setting' which remains the best short introduction to Congregational principles but is also a guide to the Christian faith, as understood by Congregationalists. The helpful 'Congregationalists and Creeds', dating from 1966, explains why Congregationalists traditionally have been hesitant towards the use of creeds, although they have witnessed to the faith as keenly as any Christians. The essays here do not wander far from the mainstream Dissenting path although the Friends make an appearance in 'Puritan and Quaker Mysticism', again a

landscape rarely visited.

Quinta Press have produced a handsome book, surely not over-priced in today's market, for here are some pearls of great price, by any estimation. The book contains an index of names and a new foreword. The publishers are to be thanked for their enterprise in recovering these essays for the modern reader and, I understand, that more volumes of Nuttall's essays are planned - on Wales perhaps, on the Friends, on the prophetic voice? Pleasures yet to come.

Daniel Brookes.

Confessing And Commending The Faith, Historic Witness and Apologetic Method. By Alan P F Sell. Pp550. University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2002. £45. ISBN 0-7083-1747-2.

With this volume, Alan Sell completes a trilogy concerned with an approach to Christian apologetic, begun with John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines and continued with Philosophical Idealism and Christian Belief, which has, he writes, occupied his thoughts during the past fifteen years.

As with the other volumes of the trilogy, Sell reveals a clear but rather compact approach to the subject. In this last book, he shows warmth and sometimes even an humorous approach. In describing the problem which Christians in all ages have had to grapple with, being both in the world but not of it, Sell not only quotes the 2nd century author of the Letter to Diognetus and others but also the 19th century American Methodist backwoods preacher, Peter Cartwright, who looked back with nostalgia to former times when:

“Parents did not allow their children to go to balls or plays; they did not send them to dancing-schools; they generally fasted once a week ... But O, how things have changed for the worse, in this educational age of the world! ... The moment we saw members begin to trim in dress after the fashionable world, we all knew they would not hold out.” (p43)

Sell begins this book by enumerating the various confessions which have been postulated in Christianity. He then moves to a section called “Propositions of the Confession” where firstly various contemporary

philosophical views on religious language are evaluated.

“...three prominent intellectual tendencies - loosely characterised as logical positivist, Wittgensteinian and post-modernist - all of which place road blocks against Christian linguistic usage, and which if heeded would inhibit Christian confession... [he continues]... but the first thing to do with road blocks is to remove them, or to skirt around them. Christian confessors need to be encouraged to think that their progress is not finally arrested by any of these... when the Christian confession is concerned [these road blocks] are, to reiterate the homely image, all attempts to pick up soup on a fork.” (p147)

Although interesting, the ideas are too densely packed without the help of a philosophical dictionary for the definitions of those terms which otherwise are inaccessible to any intelligent reader without knowledge of the subject. He then attempts, as he says, to ‘rebaptize’ the terms ‘transcendence’ and ‘immanence’ in relationship to their history in western thought from Aristotle and Neoplatonism, through others including Schleiermacher and Heidegger to Maurice Wiles. Again although useful, more definition and analysis of these thinkers’ ideas would have been advantageous.

In the third section of the work, which he entitles “Alternative Apologetic Starting Points”, he deals firstly with reason and revelation and secondly with faith, knowledge and experience where he seeks to answer “what and how far good positive grounds may be offered for Christian faith”. In this latter part of the work, Alan Sell, I believe, is at his most interesting and helpful. On the importance of faith as opposed to reason, he quotes the famous statement of Tertullian:-

“What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from ‘the porch of Solomon’ who had himself taught that ‘the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart’. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic and dialectic composition!”

The influence of the rise of “affective devotion” in the middle ages on western spirituality is somewhat cursorily dismissed. The intellectual

scepticism felt by some medieval thinkers led them to consider the Thomist synthesis of faith and reason to be inadequate. On the other hand the mystics' experience of God was not a basis for the defence of the faith. Sell seeks to find a synthesis by studying William of Ockham (Occam) (c1285-c1349) and his successful defence of nominalism as opposed to realism, by his deployment of the rule of ontological economy - Ockham's razor - which stresses that 'entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity', which made him perhaps the most influential of later medieval philosophers. Interestingly Sell notes that the reformer, Martin Luther, was "Trained in, and held up by many to have been impressed by Ockhamist ways". Luther welcomed the breakdown of the faith/reason synthesis advanced by Thomas Aquinas and Sell quotes Luther's famous dismissal of natural reason as a "harlot". Sell ends this chapter by stressing that "Christian assurance" derives from the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and is the means by which "God has made himself savingly known, which returns us to the starting point of this inquiry and urges us to its conclusion".

The fourth and final section of the work is entitled "Conclusion and Epilogue". Here the author, in his conclusion, attempts to place the subject matter of the book into the context of a world-view. Unusually the epilogue consists of a small anthology of verses from Richard Baxter, John Clare, Arnold Francis Mee, and Phillip Doddridge.

The book has interesting notes and a good bibliography. It is a useful addition to the study of apologetics.

Ifan Gruffudd

The Anxious Enquirer After Salvation Directed and Encouraged. By John Angell James. Pp viii, 149. Quinta Press, Meadow View, Weston Rhyn, Oswestry, Shropshire, SY10 7RN, 2002. £5.00. ISBN 1 897856 10 5.

This is a reprint of a Christian classic. First published in 1834 by the Religious Tract Society, it went through many editions and, as the publisher's foreword states, helped "a great many Victorians come to a genuine faith in Jesus Christ". Therefore, even though it has been out of print for many years, it demands serious consideration.

Indeed, serious consideration is what the author requires from his readers. In a five page introduction, he informs readers that they will only benefit from the book if they read in a place free from distraction; take time to meditate on it without reading too much at one time; and read it "regularly

through in order”, without skimming or picking and choosing. It is not an attempt to gain a quick conversion, but rather to enable someone who is beginning to have (in the phrase of that time) “religious impressions” to deepen and retain them. He takes the readers from concern about their eternal state, through gaining knowledge from scripture, to repentance and faith. He then outlines some of the pitfalls of the Christian life and closes with words of encouragement.

The book is a handy size - 7" by 5", slightly larger than the original editions, but still suitable for a jacket pocket or handbag. The cover is attractive, although one is curious about the symbolism of the cover picture - the sun shining on a green island reflected in a glassy blue sea. At the end of most chapters is a blank page, suitable for making notes. The author's original occasional footnotes are retained, together with a new one explaining the meaning of “solicitude”. There is also an asterisk next to “felicity” but the explanatory note is missing. This is the second of the author's works to be republished by Quinta Press and his Life and Letters are in preparation.

John Angell James was minister from 1805 to 1859 of Carr's Lane Congregational Church, Birmingham, a large city-centre church which was to have considerable influence on civic affairs. Therefore by the time he wrote this, he had considerable experience of ministering to all conditions and of writing books with popular appeal. That said, who in the twenty-first century would want to read such a book? The style and language is definitely dated but remains readable. Many different factors start people on the path to Christian faith today but one suspects that fear of eternal damnation is not the most common. (Michael Watts suggests, in his Friends of Dr Williams's Library lecture Why Did the English Stop Going to Church? (1995), that ceasing to confront people with that possibility is the main cause of current church decline.)

This book would repay serious study by anyone who wants to deepen his or her faith and learn more of its essentials. It would make an excellent course book for a church or Christian Union study group.

John McKenzie.

No Cross Marks the Spot. By Stella E. Kilby. Pp vi, 293. Galamena Press, 108 Barnstaple Road, Southend on Sea, Essex SS1 3PW, 2001. HB £22.95 plus £2.25 p&p. ISBN 0 9541 0161 8, PB £12.95 plus £2.25 p&p. ISBN 0 9541 0160 X.

In this work, illustrated with maps and photographs, Stella E Kilby, a direct descendant of one of the missionaries and his wife, who are the subject matter of the book, writes an informative and gripping story of the tragic Makololo Mission, a little known episode in the Christian history of southern Africa. Up to now it has only been discussed as a passing episode in stories of other people involved in the region.

Stella Kilby deals not only with the previous history of the eight people who died mysteriously in the marshes of Linyanti (through the diaries and letters of those involved in the venture, such as the secretary of the London Missionary Society and those working in the field, like David Livingstone) but also with the movement of the native tribes under the stress of war which forms the background to the story. She is therefore concerned with the Boers and the Zulus, the Matabele and other tribes.

This interesting story begins with the great movement of the Bantu tribes fleeing before the Zulu army, under their great leader Chaka, who, having conquered all the land and peoples east of the Drakensburg mountains, was then moving further west. David Livingstone wrote what Sebituane, chief of the Makololo, told him in 1851. Sebituane, although then merely 20 years of age, took 10,000 of his people, then known as the Bafokeng, from their homeland in the foothills of the Drakensburg Mountains, south of the Vaal river, and set them on a long journey northwards. Crossing over the Vaal, they encountered Moselekatse and his Matabele tribes, whose reign of terror had installed a fear among other tribes, and all their cattle were stolen. After many adventures the Makololo people found tranquillity in the unhealthy marshes of Linyanti. On July 6th, 1851 Sebituane died, according to Livingstone, from complications sustained in a fall from his horse. The grave of this chief can be visited and perhaps will become, as the author hopes, a tourist attraction. His death was a blow to the missionary enterprise.

The second part of the book follows the adventures of Stella Kilby and four of her family in 1999 when they travelled to southern Africa and the Linyanti marshes. They wanted the answers to three questions. Did the missionaries die of fever or were they poisoned? Where did the missionaries, Holloway Helmore, Isabella Price and their group, have their camp and where are their graves? With the help of Pierre Craven of African Getaway

Safaris, a route was worked out to cover as closely as possible the original missionary trail as far as KhamaKhama, using the names of the towns, rivers and water holes mentioned in the diaries of Helmore and Price. From here the original missionaries had cut out a path through the bushes and forests of the Mababe Plain and, as it is now easier to take another way, Kilby and her family readily accepted a detour.

Stella Kilby and her group started from the famous Kuruman mission, once the focal point of missionary activity in this region of Africa, founded by Robert and Mary Moffat, Livingstone's parents in-law. Robert was the original translator of the Bible into the Sechuana language. Both Holloway and Anne Helmore stayed there on their frequent visits. The Helmore/Price group left Kuruman on July 8th, 1859 with their four waggons on a journey that would take them seven months to reach Linyanti. The modern travellers took twelve days. The photographs of the journey in search of the fate of their ancestors are revealing, as is the account of their meeting the elders of the Mayeyi tribe (who are of the Bayeyi people) who were living in the area at the time of the dominant Makololo who ruled over them and other tribes. Their chief, Bornface ShuFu, and his elders were eager to meet the descendants of Holloway Helmore who wished discover more about the missionaries' deaths.

I hope that readers of this magazine will read the book and find out the answer to the riddle of these eight deaths. The graves lie in a remote field where "alas, no cross marks the spot" but the memory of their work is not forgotten by the descendants of those people to whom they gave the Gospel. The book has an adequate index and appendices.

Ifan Gruffudd.

An Inglorious Affair. A Decade of Dissent among Suffolk Nonconformists.
By David Holmes. Pp 92. The Salters Lane Press, 2002. Available from the author at 5 Salters Lane, Walpole, Halesworth, Suffolk IP19 9BA. £9. 25 p and p. ISBN 0-9542259-0-2.

This handsome book tells the story of an almighty but unholy row which tore asunder the Congregational community of Halesworth, in north-east Suffolk from 1866 to 1877 and which threatened the peace and stability of the Suffolk Congregational Union for several of those years. The town's Quay Street Independent Chapel had a membership of 200 or so, largely composed of traders, shopkeepers and farmers in the area. The ostensible

cause of the quarrel was the organist and choirmaster's desire that the Gloria should be sung in the services and the consequent resistance to this move from some of his fellow deacons and church members, many of whom were described as Baptists. The row led to a major secession of church members who set up a rival Congregational church in Halesworth. Seeking reconciliation of the warring parties, the county union became involved, chiefly in the person of John Browne, the immensely impressive minister of the Independent Church at Wrentham, a few miles to the north. Browne was the secretary of the Suffolk Congregational Union and was to become the author of the exhaustive History of Congregationalism in Norfolk and Suffolk (1877), still the definitive work.

A mile or two outside Halesworth lies the village of Walpole with its Old Chapel, one of the finest and simplest Independent meeting houses in the country. This converted sixteenth century timber-framed farmhouse had by the 1870s become, in David Holmes' words, "a distinguished relic" which it remains. Walpole and its chapel's fellowship were innocently drawn into the quarrel but fortunately survived largely unscathed.

The row lasted so long because the various parties to the quarrel became increasingly entrenched and it was eventually concluded only when five ministers had left the Halesworth area. This local dispute touched upon issues of wider importance such as the independence of the gathered church, its relation to the wider denomination, the place of the small and vulnerable village chapel, the enrichment or otherwise of Congregational worship by liturgical innovation (a late 19th century pre-occupation as Nonconformists answered Matthew Arnold's jibe that their worship and architecture were culturally Philistine), and the co-operation of Christians of differing views in a single congregation.

Holmes has researched his subject well. He has studied the church books and local newspapers to good effect and has freely drawn upon a rich supply of letters, between many of the main protagonists to the dispute, quoting them at length. As one might expect from a former BBC journalist, he writes well, guiding the reader safely through difficult territory. This is a user-friendly book. It is well illustrated, has an attractive design and is in every way a superior work of local history. The author has sensibly provided some definitions of terms like Dissenters, Nonconformists, Ordination, Deacons etc, a Who Was Who? of leading figures in the churches concerned, a full listing of sources and books, and an appendix, containing the names of all those in membership of the Quay Street church (including 25 members of the Haward family) during the period covered by this book. Not only does

the main text contain footnotes but Holmes has also placed in the margin the year covered by the adjoining text. Pains have been taken to ensure that the reader's needs are catered for.

Although this is a small book, a simple index would have been welcome. In addition some minor spelling mistakes have slipped through - superintendant, not superintendent, appears on pages 25 and 71 and Haleworth without the s on page 55. Yet such criticism may be carping. The book tells a good story, if a disturbing and salutary one. It deserves to be widely read and not only by East Anglian Nonconformists.

Daniel Brookes

A Brief History of Westgate Church Peterborough. By Ron Edwards. Pp 22. 2000 repr 2001. Available from the author, 33 Muskhams, Bretton, Peterborough PE3 9XU. £3.30.

This short history takes this former Congregational church from its beginnings in the 1770s, with the preaching of Cradock Glasscott, one of the Countess of Huntingdon's assistant chaplains. Its fortunes, over the years, include suffering two serious fires. Eventually it joins the United Reformed Church and subsequently unites with the (formerly Wesleyan) Methodists whose history is also summarised.

This, as the introduction states, is an interim history, as the author intends to conduct further research, particularly in the Baron Court Records. It will be interesting to see how the information this elicits indicates changes in the employment of the trustees over the years. The first trustees comprise two tailors, two glovers, one clerk, one basket maker, one wool comber and one sadler. Were there conflicts between trustees and church members as often happened and still occasionally does today? One hopes that in the future publication the term "vacancy" will be used instead of "interregnum" and that "Rev" will never be appended to a surname alone.

The booklet is attractively produced in A5 format on glossy paper, with a colour photograph of the church building on the cover. There are also a number of black and white illustrations throughout the text. The history of a church is not just the story of its ministers, so it is pleasing to find four appendices listing other officers also. The fifth appendix gives full specifications of the three organs the church has used.

Ian Black

The Making of a Modern Denomination. John Howard Shakespeare and the English Baptists 1898-1924. By Peter Shepherd. Pp xvii, 220. Paternoster Press 2001. £24.99. ISBN 0-84227-046-X.

This book is volume 4 in the series of Studies in Baptist History and Thought, currently being issued by the Paternoster Press. Its subject is the general secretariat of the Baptist Union at the beginning of the twentieth century. J H Shakespeare was also the leading Free Churchman of the first 25 years of the twentieth century. He was enormously popular, not only among his fellow Baptists but also among Congregationalists and he shared the view of many in both denominations that these two bodies of Christians should unite organically. He also argued for a federal United Free Church of England, bringing together Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists and almost achieved this. Not content with being the champion of Free Church unity, he went on to advocate that the Free Churches should accept episcopacy and unite with the Church of England. Shakespeare, as secretary of the Baptist Union, was both dynamic and innovative, introducing general superintendents, a list of accredited ministers, amassing funds held centrally by the BU etc, and these efforts to centralise the BU were followed closely by J D Jones who developed a similar agenda for the Congregational Union. In brief, therefore, Shakespeare's impact on English church life could hardly have been more dramatic and impressive and a critical assessment of his work has been long overdue.

However, Shakespeare expressly desired that no official biography should be written and his papers have not survived. Although he died as long ago as 1928, after suffering a physical and nervous collapse, an adequate account of his life and work has never appeared and he has so far evaded the attention of the editors of The Dictionary of National Biography. Peter Shepherd has attempted to provide such an account. He has not written a biography, as his title suggests, but rather a study of Shakespeare's work for the BU. Nevertheless this is a much needed book and Shepherd's achievement is considerable. It is the result of several years' painstaking research, first undertaken for a doctoral thesis, by the author who, while researching and writing, was also serving as a local Baptist minister. In itself, that shows how much seminal work may be done by essentially busy but committed people.

Yet one wonders whether Shepherd has quite understood or explored J H Shakespeare's influence on the English churches as a whole. Admittedly that was not his aim, and was certainly not the subject of his thesis, but

Shakespeare is a figure of the first importance. As the book's title states, Shakespeare was undoubtedly the maker of "a modern denomination" (which has only recently replaced his area superintendents with groups of three, who share responsibility for larger geographical areas). This scholarly work comes complete with endnotes after each chapter, appendices, an index and a full bibliography which reveals, for instance, how much may be gained by a judicious use of denominational newspapers. It will prove of benefit to historians of twentieth century church history for many years to come.

Daniel Brookes.

The Decline of Congregationalism in the Twentieth Century: The Congregational Lecture 2002. By Dr. D M Thompson. Pp35. The Congregational Memorial Hall Trust (1978) Ltd. 2002. Available from Dr William's Library, 14 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0AG. £2.00

Thompson starts by considering the statistics of decline and then moves on to look at the potential reasons. He considers sociological influences and indeed looks at the impact of such diverse factors as the ability to raise money to sustain fabric and preaching, the attendance of women and the age of a congregation. To round out his discussion, he touches on the background of ministers in relation to their congregations and the number of Congregationalists who were teaching in tertiary educational establishments.

The material is comprehensive and interesting, but perhaps there is too great an element of generality. He draws together all those carrying on the Congregational tradition after the formation of the United Reformed Church in 1972 and seems to treat them as one. Yet there is a diversity in those various groups, all of which are sustaining themselves more or less successfully. The Congregational Federation, for example, is fairly stable in terms of numbers of both members and churches, showing nothing like the steepness of decline that Thompson suggests is occurring. Indeed the strength of the Congregational Federation's training course which it offers for ministers, pastors and church workers, both in content and support, is testimony to the vibrancy of the CF.

In absolute terms Thompson's conclusions are accurate, Congregationalism has declined in the twentieth century. But that is not the whole story. Churches need to review mission and evangelistic strategies.

Denominations need to re-consider the calling and education of ministers, pastors and the role of the membership in preaching, teaching and pastoral care. But is that not a challenge to all Christian denominations in Great Britain, not just those carrying the flag of Congregationalism?

Nicholas Gleich

OUR CONTEMPORARIES

The Baptist Quarterly (vol XXXIX no 6 April 2002)

Michael A G Haykin "Voluntarism in the Life and Ministry of William Fraser (1801-1883)". Paul Weller "Insiders or Outsiders? Religions(s), State(s) and Society: Propositions for Europe Part II". Nigel Wright "Covenant and Covenanting". Peter Shepherd "James Acworth and the Creation of Rawdon College". Albert Wardin "Baptist Growth in Congress Poland".

(no 7 July 2002)

Tony Peck "Grace and Law: Baptists and Religious Freedom: Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Context". Douglas C Sparkes "Percy Holden Illingworth and the Last Liberal Government". Timothy Whelan "Six Letters of Robert Robinson from Dr Williams's Library". Stephen Wright "Leonard Busher: An additional note".

(no 8 October 2002)

B R Talbot "Baptists and the Scottish Enquiry of Religion 1836-1838". Paul R Dekar "Frank País, Baptist Martyr, Cuban Revolutionary". Gerald T Rimmington "Baptist Membership in Leicestershire Between the Two World Wars". Thornton Elwyn "Association Histories". Stephen Hulcoop and Stan Newens "John Davis: Minister at Waltham Abbey 1764-1795".

(vol 40 no 1 January 2003)

Dean R Rapp "A Baptist Pioneer: The Exhibition of Film to London's East End Working Classes 1900-1918". Ernest A Payne "John Linnell, the World of Artists and the Baptists". Michael V Jackson " 'Be Subject': Paul and the State". Roland Fleischer "Moses Richter: a bibliographic entry". Clyde Binfield "Six Letters of Robert Robinson: A suggested context and a noble footnote". Brian Stanley "Medical Missionary Practice Under Scrutiny: review article".

The Strict Baptist Historical Society Bulletin (no 28 2002)

Philip Grist "The History of the Strict Baptist Mission 1861 to 1982".

Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society (vol XXII no 4 April 2002)

Valerie Sanders "James and Harriet: Brother and Sister". Ralph Waller "James Martineau: The Critical Mind & the Will to Believe". J Frank Schulman "Martineau on the Ministry". Alan Ruston "Locked in Combat: James Martineau & the Unitarian Association". Jeremy Goring "A Trinity of Spiritual Powers: Martineau, Maurice and Newman". Andrew Brown "Martineau's Hymn Books: his evolving thought and their influence on the Unitarian movement". Alan Ruston "Review Article: the Woman's Suffrage Movement".

(vol 23 no 1 April 2003)

Andrew Hill "The Obscure Mosaic of British Universalism: An Outline and a Bibliographical Guide". Arthur Long "Unitarian Thought in the Twentieth Century. Part 2". Tony Cross " 'Damning sin she has no mind to': Harriet Martineau and William Taylor's reputation". Jeremy Goring " Young Tom Paine: Wesleyan Methodist or Rational Dissenter?"

The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society (vol 6 no 10 July 2002)

Stephen Orchard "A Letter of John Howe". Henry Rack "The Rise of Evangelical Independency in Manchester". Edward Royle "James Pigott Pritchett, Congregational Deacon and Architect". John H Taylor "Thomas Slade Jones and Vincent van Gogh: A Note". Elaine Kaye "From 'Woman Minister' to 'Minister'? One Hundred Congregational Ministers Ordained between 1917 and 1972 in England and Wales.

(vol 7 no 1 October 2002)

John Lander "Cornwall's Congregational Association - Outreach, Support, or Control?" Alan Wilkinson "John Neville Figgis and Christian Socialism". Bridget Harrison " Patrick Hugh Figgis and Christian Socialism". Ronald Boocking "Sydney Cave (1883-1953) - Missionary, Principal, Theologian".

Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society (vol 53 part 5 May 2002)

John Lander "Tent Methodism 1814-1832". Martin Wellings "The Wesley Bible Union". Gareth Lloyd " 'Running after strange women' ". Peter B

Nockles "Methodist Archives: Manuscript Accessions".

(part 6 October 2002)

Michael Hughes "The Development of Methodist Pacifism 1899-1939".
Robert A Glen "A Tangled Web: The Gilberts of Cornwall and the Gilberts
of Antigua". E Dorothy Graham "The Wesley Deaconess Order".

(vol 54 part 1 February 2003)

Stephen B Dawes "John Wesley and the Bible". Ronald Coxford "A
Working Class Sunday School?" John A Vickers "A Further Pawson Letter".

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