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# THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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### EDITORIAL

The Baptist Union polled all Baptist churches on 6 December 1992, to discover the strength of the worshipping community meeting in Baptist churches, expecting that in many places attendance figures would significantly exceed membership. This recalls the Religious Census of 1851, with its twin interest in church accommodation and patterns of attendance, which was published exactly 140 years ago. This offered an interesting assessment of religious life, not least Baptist, for Horace Mann, the compiling Registrar, had read his Crosby, Taylor and Ivimey diligently, as also the Baptist Union Reports and successive editions of the new *Baptist Manual*, so had a good context for interpreting the data collected. He presents a picture of Baptist growth: in 1716 Neal records 247 churches in England; whilst a 'Baptist source' for 1772 gives the enhanced figure of 404 congregations. Rippon's figure for 1790 is given as 332, but about 100 New Connexion churches need to be added. By 1832 Mann, using the *Baptist Magazine*, offers a figure of 1126, and seven years later 1526, with a further 244 in Wales. His own analysis for 1851 suggests 2789 Baptist churches in England and Wales offering accommodation for just over a quarter of a million, though he notes the difficulty of distinguishing chapels from preaching

stations - a total of 3327 worship locations. Then Mann has to add on the LEPs, or their equivalent in 1851, a further 67 congregations, mainly Union Chapels involving Baptists and Independents [61], but also links with Wesleyans, Moravians and Presbyterians. Two congregations involved three partner traditions. 54 mixed congregations did not declare their participating confessions, and must surely have contained some Baptists. With all this background, Horace Mann then began to 'count the people', but he could only aggregate attendances. He then assumed half the afternoon worshippers were in church for the first time and one third of the evening congregation. The number of Baptists in Union churches would seem to balance the number of General Baptists who had become *de facto* Unitarians, so that the total of Baptist attendances at all services of 907,080 may be allowed to stand. Using the Mann formula, this yields a figure for the Baptist community on Census Sunday of just under 600,000.

Of the three main dissenting denominations (Wesleyan, Independent, Baptist) the Baptists at just over 50% offered the greatest proportion of Free Seats, and Particular Baptists at 42% came next to the Wesleyan Reformers in succeeding in filling their chapels. The New Connexion were only 1% behind, but the Established Church in England could manage only 33% and in Scotland 28%, whilst the Quakers with only 8% usage were at the bottom of this table. Not all Baptist churches in England found the census acceptable, though few went to the lengths of William Skelton, minister of the small Strict Baptist congregation meeting in the half empty 25-seat Zoar Chapel in Stoke on Trent. Not for them to explain like their colleagues in Burslem that Dr Beaumont's sermons for the Wesleyan Sunday Schools had emptied many neighbouring churches, or the Baptists of Hanley who argued that a violent storm had prevented members from a distance attending worship: they still mustered 284 in the morning, but only 144 in the evening, some 40 less than normal. But Mr Skelton, whose Huntingtonian, that is Antinomian, sympathies were revealed by his use of the letters S.S. - Sinner Saved - after his name, would not let the census organizers off so lightly. In the very small box reserved for comment, in minuscule but disciplined script he penned fourteen lines of verse:

Our number for worship at all times is small  
 Yet God who is with us is greater than all.  
 And when we behold him, we numbers  
 forget,  
 But if he hides His face then we murmur  
 [sic] and fret.  
 Still this is our confidence and comfort and  
 boast,  
 With God who is infinite, numbers are lost.  
 And Jesus hath said it, though but two or  
 three,

I am with My people wherever they be,  
 When gather'd together by Me by My name  
 For worship and praise with their hearts set  
 on flame,  
 My presence shall bless them, My truth shall  
 be taught.  
 But where truth is absent, God's worship is  
 not,  
 And this from the Scripture is prov'd to be  
 true,  
 Let numbers be great or numbers be few.

General Secretaries of the Baptist Union and Mission Department statisticians take note!