

# UNITY CHAPEL, ST. PHILIP'S, BRISTOL (1850-1946)

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**D**R Higgins, Secretary of the Bristol Library for Biblical Research, provides this historical sketch of an interesting experiment in independent churchmanship in Bristol.

**C**HURCH history is a fascinating study, though beset with many difficulties. These arise from the fact that whilst the Church is the Body of Christ, apprehended only by faith, yet at the same time its history is expressed in the lives of redeemed men and women. Thus, in addition to the spiritual aspect, concerned with the supratemporal realities of man's relation to God, there is the fact that these redeemed men and women are set in human society, in a sinful world, with a message for that world. In this study, we are concerned with a small community of Christians and their relation to the environment.<sup>1</sup>

The period covered by this study, 1850-1946, is an important one, for in the earlier part of the period, the churches had been full, even to overflowing, while in the latter part, they were largely empty, and indeed closing their doors. Among the factors that led to this change were the disastrous effects of two world wars, the apparent divergence between religious truth and the claims of Science, and, more recently, the blighting influence of materialism. We shall, however, concern ourselves with the progress of a particular church and its relation to its neighbourhood, nearby churches and the group of Christians called "Christian Brethren".

## I. THE ENVIRONMENT OF UNITY CHAPEL

An interesting comment on the persistence of custom in England is provided by the fact that Unity Chapel is always identified by the parish (St. Philip's) in which its buildings were placed and from which most of its members were drawn. It is ironical that a

<sup>1</sup> I should like to express my appreciation to the Unity Trustees, who have placed the records of Unity Chapel in the Library for Biblical Research, Bristol, thus giving facilities for their study.

My thanks are also due to those who have read the script and encouraged publication.

church with strong Independent concepts should be localized by the ancient district boundaries of the State Church. The parish itself is an old one, and the parish church of SS. Philip and Jacob was established before 1220. One of the incumbents of the church in the seventeenth century, a Mr. Yeomans, had been instrumental in the formation of the Puritan group that later became the Broadmead Baptist Church, still active in this day.

From the seventeenth century onward, the parish had been the site of various industries, including, in the earlier days, potteries, iron foundries and glassware manufacturers. Later, other major employers of labour included soap manufacturers, chocolate makers, several tobacco firms (later incorporated into Wills' tobacco empire), and coal mining (there were collieries in Easton, Whitehall, St. George and Bedminster, which were opened in the earlier part of the nineteenth century and closed in the present century). The rapid railway development in the nineteenth century led to the Midland Railway establishing an important branch in the parish. Also nearby were several large breweries (still very active), and also a cotton mill, now housing an electrical components factory.

This heavy industrial development, with the associated demand for labour, led to rapid housing development from 1835 onward, and so large numbers of terraced cottages in streets, with very little in the way of privacy or beauty, appeared. In the present day, the position is different. Most of these streets have been demolished as part of slum clearance projects. Several of the industries have either disappeared altogether, e.g., the glassware industry, or have removed to more pleasant surroundings, e.g., the Fry chocolate firm which moved to a "garden" factory at Keynsham, outside the city. The greatly improved facilities for public transport have led to many of the workers in local industries living at some considerable distances from their employment. These changes can be seen in the accompanying table, the data for which have been extracted from the decennial census figures.

| Locality     | 1841    | 1861    | 1881    | 1911    | 1931    |
|--------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| St. Philip's | 21,590  | 31,573  | 50,108  | 40,645  | 39,040  |
| St. George   | 8,318   | 10,276  | 26,423  | 46,434  | 47,162  |
| City         | 142,825 | 179,063 | 266,259 | 357,971 | 397,012 |

It is clear then that the story of the church at Unity Chapel is that of a church in an industrial area, drawing its strength from the industrial working classes, and witnessing in that same locality.

## II. THE ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH

The beginnings of the church are to be found in the open-air preaching activities of a young Cornishman, John Victor. He was born in 1820, at Marazion, and brought up among the Methodists. At the age of 17 he was converted, and later became a local preacher. Some years after, he came to Bristol, where he was greatly influenced by George Müller and Henry Craik, becoming a member of the fellowship at Bethesda Chapel. He commenced preaching in a small house in Goat Alley, Unity Street, Narrow Plain. Two years later, in 1852, he left to carry on evangelistic work in Clevedon, and a retired Army officer, Major R. S. Tireman, R.A., undertook the pastoral duties.

The increasing congregation was soon too large for the house, and, in 1855, a small chapel, with seating for 200, was built in Unity Street, nearby. The cost, about £900, was borne by Major Tireman; incidentally, the building is still in existence and is now used for a small engineering works. In 1862, however, a much larger building, seating 800, was opened in Midland Road, and this became the permanent centre of the work. In 1865, a large schoolroom was built, and later still, the accommodation of the main chapel was increased by adding galleries, capable of seating another 400 people. In 1946, the buildings were sold and the proceeds used to build another chapel in the post 1939-45 War estate, called Lockleaze.

## III. THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE CHURCH

The details of the church membership are preserved in the various registers, and, for the early years, in a pamphlet, published in 1864. The church and vestry minute-books also record changes in the membership of the church.

The 1864 pamphlet contains, in addition to a copy of the rules and an account of the origin of the church, a nominal roll, the names in which are arranged according to the streets in which the people lived. The area covered by the streets is in the immediate neighbourhood of the church, and many of the houses show one or more members in the church. In addition to the names, the date of their entry to the church is also given. Using this information, we find that the membership in 1855 was 9, and by 1864 it was 303, there being 97 men and 204 women. The annual increase in membership from 1855 to 1859 is 9, 18, 14, 15, and 18 respectively. Then, from 1860-64, there is a dramatic increase, viz. 44,

34, 64, 64, and 21, resulting in an increase in membership from 120 to 303.<sup>2</sup>

The years 1859-1862 are those in which the Second Great Evangelical Awakening took place, and Bristol was visited by many of the well-known Revival preachers, e.g., the Hon. and Rev. Baptist Noel, Mr. Reginald Radcliffe and Mr. H. Grattan Guinness. Prominent among their local supporters was Major Tireman, and his name appears frequently in the local newspaper reports of the meetings. It seems clear that the great increase in the membership of the church at this time was a direct result of the Revival as well as the labours of its active pastor.<sup>3</sup>

No further figures are available until 1876, when they are recorded in the annual minutes as far as 1892. From then onward, the figures are only occasionally given, and from 1931 no details at all are preserved in the minutes. It is possible to get some idea of the progress of the church by considering the vestry and church meeting minutes which record those received into the church and those removed for various reasons, e.g., death, removal to another area or church, failure to attend the meetings, or excommunication.

In 1876, the recorded membership was 390, and there was a slow steady increase until, in 1895, the number was about 520. There was then a sharp decrease in the next few years, when the numbers fell to 360 in 1901. From then onward, there was a slow but steady decline until the onset of the First World War in 1914, when the membership was about 200. During the War years, there was an increase of about 70, despite the fact that many of the men were members of the Forces. After the war, the membership remained fairly static at about 260, until 1931, when no further details are given. In 1943, when some business had to be transacted, only 31 members could be traced.

Thus, the history of the membership of the church at Unity Chapel could be considered in two periods, viz. the first 50 years, which are years of growth and expansion; and the second 50 years which are those of slow decline, though this does not necessarily mean that there was no active spiritual work done at this time.

#### IV. THE YEARS OF EXPANSION (c. 1850-1900)

The early history of Unity is not one of uniform expansion, as

<sup>2</sup> We have assumed that no members died or left during these nine years.

<sup>3</sup> Note that these figures are rather less than those given by Dr. J. Edwin Orr in his account *The Second Evangelical Awakening in England*—he quotes E. J. Poole-Connor, *Evangelical Unity*, who actually had a copy of the pamphlet which I have analysed.

if the church was added to in terms of an arithmetical progression. It is irregular, more after the pattern of human development in which there are two major spurts, at birth and adolescence, each followed by quieter growth, until maturity is reached, when after years of vigour and activity, the natural processes of ageing become dominant.

From the earliest days in 1850 until the years of revival in 1858, there was a period of very rapid expansion, increasing in number over 30 times from about 10 to over 300. From the revival to the turn of the century, there was only a twofold increase, from about 300 to just over 500. In the latter period, the numbers admitted to the church vary from 15 to 70, with an annual average of 36. These numbers would be high by our standards today. The percentage increase is more instructive, for in the first period, it varied from 25 to 50 per cent ; in the latter, it was of the order of 10 to 20 per cent.

What lessons can be gleaned from these figures? The main lesson seems to be that in the earlier days, though the numbers were smaller, the proportion of keen and active members was much higher, so that the spiritual activity of the church was of a much higher order. As the membership increased in size, so the proportion of active members fell, and it became easier for others to sit back and to let the few do the work.

There is some evidence to support this in the vestry minutes, for the elders frequently complain of the apathy and lack of interest of members. They also complain that though relatively large numbers came to the morning service, yet many left before the Breaking of Bread service held directly afterward. Numerous exhortations are recorded in which the flock was encouraged to attend the weeknight meetings, such as the prayer meeting.

What about the other churches in Bristol at this time? Bishop Wickham, in his book *Church and People in an Industrial City*, calls this period "the years of religious boom", and with some justification too. It was an era of church going, and church building too. In Bristol, during these years, there were 29 new Anglican churches built, as well as 12 Congregational and 12 Baptist churches. Among the Methodists, there was even greater growth, perhaps related to the numerous dissensions that occurred with subsequent reduplication of effort. In Kingswood, a small mining village outside Bristol, and the scene of Whitefield's and Wesley's labours among degraded miners, there were 42 Methodist chapels as well as 17 other Nonconformist bodies in 1911. In Matthew's Bristol directory for 1848, there are 10

Methodist chapels noted, but by 1900, there are 56 listed. Many other groups flourished too. The Salvation Army, which reached Bristol during the period in question, had 10 centres by 1900. The Bristol City Mission, founded in 1831 by local merchants and clergymen, had opened nine chapels by the end of the century.

During the period in question, there were two religious censuses in the years 1851 and 1881. The latter census is the more important for our purpose: it was taken on Sunday, 30th October, 1881, and the results were published in full in the *Western Daily Press* a few days later. In the accompanying table, details are given of the numbers who attended the morning and evening services at Unity and the churches in the district.

| PLACE OF WORSHIP            | MORNING | EVENING |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|
| Unity Chapel                | 255     | 590     |
| Barton Hill Prim. Methodist | 204     | 300     |
| Kingsland Chapel (Cong.)    | 157     | 246     |
| Barton Hill City Mission    | 184     | 260     |
| St. Luke's, Barton Hill     | 354     | 420     |
| Holy Trinity, St. Philip's  | 768     | 1099    |
| SS. Philip's & Jacob's      | 612     | 687     |

These are considerable figures of attendance, especially when compared with those of today. The Church of England shows the highest attendance, considerably more so than those of Nonconformist pattern; this may be partly a reflection of the greater demands made by membership of the Nonconformist churches. The attendance at the evening service is always higher than the morning attendance. In the case of Unity, there was a weekly Breaking of Bread service, preceded by a sermon-type service. Attendance at the communion service would be strictly for members, and this would tend to limit the attendance of non-members in the morning, whereas in the evening there would be no such distinction. The actual membership of Unity of 1881 was 389, so that probably much less than two-thirds of the church membership actually attended the weekly communion service. This is striking when it is remembered that this was the most important meeting of the week.

Another feature to be noted is that at this time Unity actually had seating for 1,200 people, and so despite the large evening attendance, the chapel was only about half full. This, by and large, would be true for the other churches, and when we remember that the population of the parish was of the order of 50,000, it is

clear that even in the age of "religious boom" large numbers of the population were outside the reach of the churches.

#### V. THE YEARS OF DECLINE (c. 1900-1946)

The church in 1895 had a nominal roll of over 500 members, yet 10 years later the membership had declined to half of this figure (249 in 1905). From then to the onset of the 1914 War the figure remained constant. The reason for the decline may possibly be partly due to controversies which took place at this time. The late G. H. Lang had become the pastor in 1900, and had introduced two new principles into the church, which became the source of controversy and later led to a small group, headed by the choir leader, leaving the church. These principles were as follows:—

- i. The pastor should receive no stated salary, as had been customary from the onset, but should be dependent upon the freewill gifts of the people, for he was not the servant of the church, but the servant of the Lord. This practice had been followed for many years by Müller and Craik at Teignmouth and at Gideon and Bethesda Chapels, Bristol.
- ii. The usual method of settling church business by a majority vote, beside being held to be unscriptural, was impractical in that it led to dissatisfied minorities, and should be replaced by the consent of an undivided church, i.e., each decision should be a unanimous decision. This, too, was a common practice among the Brethren communities.

Despite these differences, relations between the pastor and his flock were cordial, and the years are full of vigorous evangelistic effort. Regular open-air services were held; house-to-house visitation carried out and special midnight services held with the object of reaching men and women leaving public houses. They co-operated, too, with the Torrey-Alexander Mission of 1904, held in the Colston Hall.

After a slight increase in membership during the 1914-18 War, which was presumably a result of the fear and uncertainty engendered by the war, the numbers remained at a fairly steady level for many years. The numbers added to the church annually were very much less than in the previous decades, usually being less than five. The end result of this process would be that though the numbers remained the same, the proportion of old people would greatly increase, and consequently reduce the work that the church could undertake. This process was aided, too, by the slum clear-

ance projects that were under way at the time, for many of the younger people with their families were removed to estates a great distance away from the church. Finally, the difficulties of the 1939-45 war years added greatly to the problems facing the church. The limitations of public transport and the imposition of a black-out led to the curtailment of evening services, and finally the air raids led to a radical reduction in activity, until in 1946 the church was disbanded and the premises sold.

The lesson to be learned seems to be that the church needs continual replacements, and, even more, it must be the centre of witness that the New Testament envisages. Furthermore, the buildings are not more important than the people, and where the people are, the centre of witness needs to be. This could be emphasized by the story of Kingsland Chapel, a Congregational chapel, and the closest neighbour of Unity, which was founded in 1834 and closed in 1950. The building still remains high and dry, as all the surrounding houses have been demolished and the people removed under slum clearance projects. The same pattern of growth and expansion, followed by slow declension as the population moves away from the church neighbourhood, could be reduplicated many times, and leads one to wonder whether too much stress is laid upon the building, even by those groups which conceive of the local church not as a building but a fellowship of redeemed men and women.

#### VI. THE BELIEFS OF THE CHURCH AT UNITY CHAPEL

Each member of the church was given on his reception by the church a card, giving details of the meetings held by the church, the doctrines held, and the duties incumbent upon the members. Among the doctrines listed on the card were: —

- i. That the Scriptures are the inspired and supreme rule of faith.
- ii. That salvation from sin is by faith in Christ's sacrifice only.
- iii. That the Holy Spirit quickens and sustains Christ's life in us.
- iv. That the Coming and Reign of Christ draw near.

The official headed notepaper of the church included as part of the heading a summary of belief.

1. The Bible—the inspired and infallible Word of God.
2. The Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. The vicarious substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf.

4. The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit.
5. The Unity of all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. "That they may all be one".

They held strongly to the concept of a gathered church, for the pamphlet of 1864 defined the church as consisting of those who believe in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and give evidence of a vital change of heart.

The baptism of believers was alone recognized as the scriptural mode of baptism, and was enjoined on believers, but it was not made essential to membership of the church.

The independence of the local church was clearly held, and to the end they refused to join any form of federation or association.

#### VII. THE FINANCES OF THE CHURCH AT UNITY

We may consider this subject under two heads, namely, provision of money for capital expenditure and, secondly, the week by week expenditure.

The first chapel was provided by Major Tireman's generosity entirely, so the 1864 pamphlet informs us. The cost was about £900. The second chapel, a much larger building, costing considerably more, was paid for largely by gifts from sources other than the resources of Major Tireman or the church. A report in the *Western Daily Press* (Jan. 1st, 1861) describing the opening of the Bristol City Mission at Broad Plain, St. Philip's, gives an account of Major Tireman's report on his work. In the course of his remarks, he spoke of hoping to provide a much larger building than the one that was being opened, and that to this end he had issued circulars, soliciting contributions to the new chapel. Furthermore, he related how he had received the previous evening a letter from a perfect stranger in the Orkney Islands, enclosing a gift of £20 towards the new building. The same pattern appears in 1880, when a new central heating system was installed. The cost was £107, and of this £84 was given by non-church members.

Several of the account books have been preserved, and these give details of the weekly offerings and collections from 1875 to 1887, and from 1939 to 1946. Between 1875 and 1887, the annual total of the weekly collection varied from £223 11s. 3½d. to £304 14s. 3¾d. In the latter period, it fell from £141 0s. 3½d. in 1939 to £33 12s. 9½d. in 1946. The complete details, with membership numbers for the earlier period, are given in the table.

| YEAR | ANNUAL AMOUNT | MEMBERSHIP |
|------|---------------|------------|
| 1875 | £256 5 6½     |            |
| 1876 | £248 14 2½    | 390        |
| 1877 | £246 0 0½     | 370        |
| 1878 | £242 15 5¾    | 365        |
| 1879 | £229 8 11¾    | 363        |
| 1880 | £223 11 3½    | 378        |
| 1881 | £243 1 3½     | 389        |
| 1882 | £267 10 2¾    | 421        |
| 1883 | £279 2 6¾     | 474        |
| 1884 | £297 6 2      | 470        |
| 1885 | £304 14 0½    | 450        |
| 1886 | £293 0 3½     | 470        |
| 1887 | £290 9 4½     | 463        |

In conjunction with these figures, we can take the 1881 census figures of attendance and the details of the collections. The attendances at the morning and evening services were 255 and 590 respectively. On that day, the church collection was £2 8s. 3d. and the congregational collection was £2 13s. 1½d., making a total of £5 1s. 4½d. If the morning attendance represents mostly church members, then the average donation was 2¼d; the congregational collection represents an average of less than 1¼d. It is true that these were days of extremely poor wages, and that the value of the pound sterling was considerably higher than it is at the present day, but even so this represents a low level of Christian giving. This can be confirmed from the vestry minutes of 1880, in regard to the installation of central heating already mentioned. The church provided £23 of the total cost of £107. That £23 was given by 90 members, an average of approximately 5/- each. Yet the membership of the church at the time was 378.

The complaints about members failing to share in the grace of giving were repeated the following year, 1881, when at the annual church meeting it was stated that about two-thirds of the membership gave nothing.

The poor fund during the same period varied from £4 to £48, and some 12 to 16 people were supported by the church.

#### VIII. THE ORGANIZATION AND ACTIVITIES OF UNITY

G. H. Lang records in his autobiography a humorous story concerning one of its pastors, Mr. W. J. Morgan, who belonged to a ministers' fraternal. When asked how he should be described for the register, a well-known Congregational minister, Urijah Thomas, replied, "Call him an Independent Baptist Brother". This was a

pretty accurate summary, for, as we have seen, they maintained the autonomy of the local church as did the early Independents, they practised believers' baptism, as did the Baptists, and at their weekly Breaking of Bread there was liberty of ministry, as practised by the Brethren.

From the inception of the church there was a formal pastorate until 1915. The pastors were:—

|                             |                     |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Rev. John Victor            | 1850-1852           |
| Major Henry Stephen Tireman | 1867-1873 co-pastor |
| Rev. W. J. Morgan           | 1852-1873           |
|                             | 1873-1899           |
| Mr. G. H. Lang              | 1900-1908           |
| Rev. F. E. Marsh            | 1910-1912           |
| Rev. Joseph Smale           | 1913-1915           |

From 1915 onward there was no formal pastorate, but elders, suitably gifted, and recognized by the church, carried out the duties.

It is curious to see Mr. John Victor described as 'Reverend', for he was a stalwart member of the early Brethren, but he is so described in newspaper reports of the time. Both George Müller and Henry Craik are also designated in the same way. After leaving Bristol, he was associated with Copse Road Chapel, Clevedon.

Major Tireman has been mentioned already. After his death, an inscribed tablet was erected in the church. In 1945, the tablet fell down and was broken beyond repair. The inscription read as follows:—

This tablet, erected to the memory of Major Henry Stephen Tireman, R.A., by the members of this church and congregation, feebly expresses their affection for one who was an earnest preacher of the Gospel, a faithful Pastor and a true friend, after 20 years of patient labour for the spiritual welfare of this neighbourhood, during which these and other buildings, for the service and glory of God, were erected, mainly by his exertions.

"Looking unto Jesus". Heb. 12: 2

"The Righteous shall be had in  
Everlasting Remembrance".

His funeral service was taken jointly by Mr. Victor and George Müller, who preached from 2 Peter 1: 5-11.<sup>4</sup>

Mr. G. H. Lang afterward became well known and undertook extensive missionary journeys. He also published many books, many of which are of considerable value.<sup>5</sup> The Rev. F. E. Marsh

<sup>4</sup> *The Bristol Mercury*, Aug. 16, 1873.

<sup>5</sup> See his autobiography, *An Ordered Life* (Paternoster Press, 1959); a list of his principal writings appears on pp. 250-2.

also published some expository works on *The Atonement*, and *The Structural Principles of the Bible*, both of which have recently been republished.

Among the activities of the church, we must mention the Sunday School, which for many years was a thriving hive of activity, providing scope for teachers, and training for young men, as well as being a field for evangelism. It too follows the pattern of changes noted in the church, namely, a gradual falling off in numbers as the population tended to move away.

There were also tract societies, open air meetings, a Missionary Union, a Band of Hope Temperance Society, a young peoples' fellowship, a Mothers' Meeting, and last but not least a strong link with the Unity Homes for the Aged. These had been founded in the early 1920's by Mr. Alfred Dennes, for many years treasurer and, later, secretary of the meeting.

The elders and deacons of the church were elected for a three year period by a ballot system. They met at least once a month and a vestry minute book was kept. It is an important adjunct to the study of the church minutes, for other points of view are often given in them, and they show the care and thought that lie behind the more formal resolutions of the church minutes. They not only saw to the business of the Church, but in addition prayed over their flock, and visited them. In earlier days, when the church was so large, they even planned to introduce a ticket system for entry to the communion service in order to keep an eye on the attendance of members.<sup>6</sup> The treasurer, too, often found himself out of pocket at the end of the financial year, for several times do we read of the church being indebted to the treasurer. They discharged their duties faithfully and their example could well be emulated, particularly in the care which they paid to regular visiting of members.

#### IX. THE RELATION OF UNITY TO THE 'BRETHREN'

One of the elders in the closing period of the church had occasion to write a short note on the history of Unity, and his comment was: "Unity Chapel from its commencement was known as an assembly of Christian Brethren, not attached, but in very close fellowship with Open Brethren".

Certainly, those active in its early days were at one time members of Bethesda Chapel. Among the trustees of the buildings were many of the prominent local brethren, e.g., James Wright,

<sup>6</sup> Compare the class and ticket system of early Methodism.

John Withy, W. E. Vine, W. R. Lewis, F. S. Arnot and Professor Rendle Short.

Among those who preached at various times in Unity were the following directors of Müller Homes for Children—George Müller, James Wright, F. Bergin, and A. E. Green.

There was no strict localization of love and fellowship to one particular group of Christians, for we find that at one stage the church at Unity had fellowship with the vicar of the local parish church, SS Philip and Jacob. He even preached in Unity on several occasions, and, together with G. H. Lang, then at Unity, preached in the open air at the corner of Midland Road and Old Market Street. Indeed, at the resignation of the rector, Mr. J. O. West, in 1909, they expressed their regret in a unanimous resolution at the annual church meeting, expressing at the same time their "high appreciation of the Christian grace and charity which at all times marked his relation with them, and of the cordial manner in which he has co-operated with them at all times in labours for their common Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ".

So we end this review of the history of the church meeting at Unity Chapel. We find that it is the story of men and women, born again, and filled with the vision glorious. We see the first beginnings, expanding vigorously, and then as the need changes a slow retraction of the work in that area, but not a cessation of the work of God. For it still goes on, in different ways and places, with other servants, but many owing a debt of gratitude to those who laboured faithfully at Unity.

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*Bristol.*