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DENOMINATIONAL RENEWAL
A Study in English Baptist Church Life and Growth 1901-1906

Between 1901 and 1906, Baptist church membership in England and Wales grew substantially. According to Payne, this amounted to an increase of over 60,000, or about 17%.[1] In fact, in spite of the fall in numbers following the peak year of 1906, the first decade of the century probably saw a numerical increase that was greater than in any decade of the nineteenth century, including the heady 1870s, when Spurgeon was in his prime and Moody and Sankey were travelling the country.[2]

Statistics like these do not reveal everything. In percentage terms, the rate of growth was much smaller than it was in the first half of the nineteenth century and, relative to the population as a whole, Baptists had been losing ground since about 1880. The early 1900s were nevertheless characterized by vigour and growth. There was a sense of hope and progress, even in the face of the huge challenges of the new century.

The Welsh Revival probably accounted for about half the total increase in membership in England and Wales between 1900 and 1910.[3] Important though that was for Wales, it had very little impact on English Baptists. The vitality and expectancy in English Baptist life was of a different character. Its mood was reflected in the confident assertion of the *Baptist Times and Freeman* in its first issue of 1901: 'No-one with any adequate knowledge of the past can doubt that never has there been a time in which it was more desirable to live than in Great Britain just now'.[4]

PRELUDE: THE 1890s

The nineteenth century had been an extraordinary one for Nonconformists. Numbers had increased steadily and disadvantageous legislation had been removed. In spite of the entrenched privileges of the Established Church and the aristocracy, they had gained a secure and influential place in the country. Middle-class suburbia had proved especially fertile ground for their evangelistic activity, and they were comfortable with the liberal, entrepreneurial values that lay at the heart of Victorian society.

There was, however, a sense of anxiety and urgency about the task of mission they faced. There were more battles to be fought, and greater heights to be scaled. Priority was consistently given to the task of evangelism, and one of the central challenges was the urban working class. Charles Booth's exhaustive survey of London society, undertaken over several years and finally published at the turn of the century, concluded that: 'the great section of the population, which passes by the name of the working classes, lying socially between the lower middle class and the 'poor', remains, as a whole, outside of all the religious bodies',[5] and that 'the great masses of the people remain apart from all forms of religious communion'.[6]

Booth's study was not the only one to confront the churches with the challenges of twentieth-century urban society. William Booth had published his impassioned appeal, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, in 1890. He wrote:

> All the way through my career I have keenly felt the remedial action usually enunciated in Christian programmes and ordinarily employed by Christian philanthropy to be lamentably inadequate for any effectual dealing with the despairing miseries of these outcast classes.

There was need for 'a more comprehensive method', he believed, in order to reach and save the perishing crowds of the cities.[7] Andrew Mearns, Secretary of the London Congregational Union, had awakened Congregationalists to the same need with the publication, originally anonymous, of *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Enquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor* in 1883.

Informed Baptists were well aware of the challenge of the cities and rightly suspected that without success in that area, spiritual progress was seriously threatened. Two of the greatest Baptist figures of the day were committed to addressing the problem. John Clifford, at Westbourne Park, Paddington, developed a range of organizations reaching out to the working classes and poor in the neighbourhood, including an Institute, a Young Women's Home and a Mission in the slum area of North Kensington.[8] South of the River Thames, F.B. Meyer was, from 1892, busily engaged in mission of a similar kind, and was for many years associated with the Baptist deaconess movement and its Home and Mission in the Holborn area.[9] In similar ways, hundreds of other churches were seeking to rise to the challenge. Charles Booth himself acknowledged that the Baptists were among the most effective in reaching the working classes, commending such churches as the East London and Shoreditch Tabernacles.[10]

The 1890s had begun with the final incorporation of the New Connexion of General Baptists into the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland. One of the consequences of this was an increased sense of denominational cohesion and unity, a quality that had always characterized the life of the Connexion. Under Samuel Booth, the Union's first full-time Secretary, a number of other important developments were taking place, which similarly strengthened the Union as the co-ordinating centre of denominational life and mission. John Shakespeare, one of the prominent younger ministers, addressed the Spring Assembly in 1892 on 'Baptist Church Extension in Large Towns', urging the adoption of a nationwide scheme to 'weld into a real and active unity the scattered or contending forces of the Baptist Churches of Great Britain'.[11] He provoked the delegates with the following challenge:

> Unorganized Congregationalism is today only another name for selfishness ... God forgive us that we have been in the midst of the perishing multitudes, not like the compassionate Master, but enjoying our religious privileges, rapt in glorious memories and clutching at a dead idol, the brazen and deceptive serpent of an extreme and selfish independency.[12]

Shakespeare's appointment as Union Secretary six years later was an endorsement by the Baptist community as a whole of these sentiments.

Co-operation among Nonconformists increased significantly with the remarkable success of the Free Church movement. There was talk of the possibility of a United Free Church. A multitude of local Councils sprang up from 1894 onwards; united evangelistic missions and crusades against various 'moral evils' were conducted; a Free Church catechism was published; and a full-time organizing secretary and two full-time missioners were appointed.

At the 1900 Free Church Congress, the incoming President of the National Free Church Council, Wesleyan C.H. Kelly, addressed the gathered delegates as representatives of 'the great Free Church of Great Britain', and called them to devote themselves to mission.[13] Baptist leaders were fully committed to the Free Church cause, serving on the National Council's central committee and providing two of the first six Presidents.[14]

Many Baptists were, however, conscious of the stigma of exclusion from the mainstream of public national life. Nonconformists, and Baptists in particular, were still frequently portrayed as uncultured, poorly educated and marginal members of society. Naturally they smarted at the unfairness of such prejudice and made strenuous efforts to overcome it. When it could be afforded (and sometimes even when it could not) new church buildings were erected in an elaborate gothic style, with stained glass windows and stalls for robed choirs. Attempts were made to 'improve' the quality of worship. Efforts were put into ministerial education and denominational scholarship, with Regent's Park College often at the fore. The opening of Mansfield (Congregational) College at Oxford in 1886 had been an example to the whole of Nonconformity of what could be done.

The ambition to place Free Church principles at the heart of national life, and to gain for the Free Church denominations a status and recognition that their numbers deserved, was strongly held. It was seen as an integral part of the advance that was surely coming in the new century.

Evangelism, organization and social acceptance were, then, central issues in Baptist church life as the new century dawned. Shakespeare devoted his considerable energy and organizing skill to helping the denomination rise to these challenges. He saw the Baptist Union as the primary vehicle for achieving his objective.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY FUND

The need to bring the Twentieth Century Fund appeal to a successful conclusion was Shakespeare's first major task. It had been proposed by Union President Samuel Vincent in 1898 and was launched in April 1899. The money would be used to make grants for new church buildings, to construct a new denominational headquarters in London, and for the support and training of ministers. It was an unprecedented venture for Baptists for two reasons - its size and the manner of its administration. £250,000 was an immense target, especially for a denomination that lacked an

effective national organizational structure. The fact that its use was to be in the hands of the Union, rather than local churches or associations (as was the case with the Congregationalists' similar fund) was highly significant, contributing in time to a profound change of emphasis throughout the whole denomination.

By the beginning of 1901, the Fund had assumed an importance far beyond that of raising money. It had become a test of corporate Baptist strength and effectiveness, and the ability of the denomination to meet the challenge of the future. As a leading article in the *Baptist Times and Freeman*, entitled 'The Soul of the Twentieth Century Fund', had asserted when it was launched, it had come to be seen by many as 'a means to spiritual revival'.[15] Opposition to such high ideals was not readily tolerated, and ministers who failed to support the Fund (of whom there was a good number) were described by Shakespeare as 'ignoble, blind and selfish'.[16]

Both the Congregationalists and the Wesleyans conducted similar appeals - the latter, with their greater numbers, relative affluence and efficient organization, for £1,000,000. There was a feeling, expressed frequently in the *Baptist Times*, that the Baptists had to prove themselves among the Free Churches. The leading article in the last issue of 1900 did not believe the denomination had the position in national life it should have acquired.[17] The Fund could be one of the means by which that could be put right. It marked for the Baptists a substantial shift of initiative for mission and renewal towards the Union. Effective national organization was regarded by those who planned and backed the appeal as vital.

At the start of 1901, over £160,000 had already been given or promised. The dramatic story of the appeal continued to unfold in the pages of the *Baptist Times*. An elaborate national organization for fund-raising had been constructed over the course of the preceding year, with an organizing secretary in each Association, and a Fund Secretary and Treasurer in each local church, as well as a strong central committee. Shakespeare, whose personality and drive increasingly dominated the appeal, admitted later that the idea of the Fund 'had been like a mania with him'.[18] He took a two-month vacation in January and February, in order to recuperate and renew his energy for the final effort to reach the target. At the Spring Assembly he returned to the fray. The *Baptist Times*'s report included:

> The Secretary asked, solemnly and seriously, desiring to place the matter upon their hearts and consciences - that from 1st of October next, to the 31st of the following December, the churches should, apart from immediate and pressing local claims only, clear all else out of the way, and work entirely for the Baptist Twentieth Century Fund.[19]

He went on in familiar vein to ask whether his audience wished to fail where the Wesleyans were succeeding. Did they want to be a reproach in the world? At the same Assembly, momentum and purpose was added to the appeal when the foundation stone for the new Baptist Union headquarters in Southampton Row was laid. The building was to be a lasting symbol of all that the Fund represented.

Shakespeare was eager to enrol the help of the women in the denomination, and

in May 1901 the Baptist Woman's Century Fund League was formed. The means by which they would play their part was the Million Shilling Scheme. Progress was reported regularly in the *Baptist Times*.

In spite of the prodigious efforts being put in, not only by Shakespeare, but by many other leading figures in the denomination, including all three of the Presidents that served during the course of the appeal (John Clifford, William Cuff and Alexander Maclaren), there was real doubt about whether the denomination would achieve its target. Many churches had contributed nothing, and there was a feeling that the money so far donated and promised was falling behind what was required. It had been agreed that the appeal could not continue for longer than three years, and would have to be concluded at the 1902 Spring Assembly. Shakespeare's health failed under the strain that the Fund was imposing on him, and he was forced to cancel all his engagements for four months from July 1901. In his own account, he acknowledged in 1904, that 'the effort to raise the last £70,000 was very strenuous and severe'.[20] One correspondent expressed the view that Shakespeare's very life depended on a successful outcome.[21]

Opposition to the Fund and what it represented was mainly expressed through *The Baptist*, the weekly newspaper that prided itself on being independent of the Union. It was consistently luke-warm about the project, and mention of it is far less frequent than in the *Baptist Times*, now under the editorial control of Shakespeare. In 1900, after the national Spring Assembly, a leading article had wondered, '... may it not possibly be said just now that one's soul may be saved and one's life sanctified even though we contribute not to the deservedly popular Twentieth Century Fund?'[22] By 1901 *The Baptist*'s criticism was more marked.

> It can hardly appear to the outside world to be very dignified for a body of Christian people claiming as Baptists a name for so absolutely relying upon the spiritual nature of their faith and work, that they should devote so much time and energy in this brief life in literally dinning the ears and hammering at the consciences and pockets of their fellow-members in a tone implying that the Kingdom of God must fail if they did not ... reach the standard set up.[23]

An important leading article in the *Baptist Times* of 23 August 1901 spelt out the official view of the Fund's implications for the denomination as a whole. It was helping to change the whole concept of 'denomination'. Gradually, a sense of the need for, and importance of, 'organized congregationalism' was spreading: 'The Fund ... has done marvels ... by rapidly developing the Denominational Idea. The united effort has given us, in an almost new sense, a united people ... The Fund may be said to have caused the Denomination to embody itself.'[24]

Reforms were being suggested that would dramatically alter the way Baptists conducted their affairs, such as the co-ordination of ministerial training, the concept of a national Baptist Church, an itinerant ministry, a national scheme for facilitating ministerial settlements, and a proper denominational pension scheme for ministers. Repeatedly, the example of Methodism was raised in the pages of the *Baptist Times*,

and the belief expressed that Baptists could retain a modified congregational independency alongside a Wesleyan-style connexionalism.[25] There is no doubt that the Twentieth Century Fund was a powerful catalyst for these ideas. A sign of the times occurred when the *Baptist Times* appeared at the beginning of 1902, describing itself for the first time as 'The *Official* Organ of the Baptist Denomination'. The newspaper was now firmly and confessedly an expression of the views of the Union and its Secretary.

In February 1902, a series of articles by William Chivers, a leading Baptist businessman, appeared in the *Baptist Times*, appealing for a new central denominational fund for the support of the ministry. The Twentieth Century Fund was not, it seemed, to be the last such appeal. The need for greater centralization, and a suggested structure for achieving it, were urged upon readers in the leading article of 11 April: 'More and more power must be vested in the central executive, only, however, that thence it may be the more swiftly ... devolved upon the other subordinate centres ... Denominational funds and denominational property, as well as denominational aims, must be unified.'[26]

A simultaneous collection in aid of the Twentieth Century Fund was organized on 23 March 1902, and raised £18,000, leaving a further £15,000 to be given or promised in the last month. By 18 April, just a fortnight before the closing date, Shakespeare admitted he was 'at his wits' end' to know how to raise the last £10,000.[27] As the Assembly delegates met on its first day (28 April), he made a final, emotional plea, and a collection made some small inroads into the amount still required.

On the last morning of the Assembly, 1 May 1902, the final day of the three-year appeal, delegates waited anxiously for Shakespeare's announcement. They saw his pale, slight figure come to the rostrum, and heard his dramatic announcement: 'My President and brethren, it is with profound thankfulness that I report to you today that our Twentieth Century Fund effort has been crowned with complete success.'[28] At this point the whole audience rose to cheer and applaud and sing the doxology. It was some time before Shakespeare was able to continue: 'The future of the Baptist community was never so bright as it is today.'[29] He went on to explain that success in raising the £250,000 target was due to a last minute gift of £5,000 from the estate of William Chivers, who had died two months before. The family had communicated their desire to honour his memory in this way only on the penultimate day of the Assembly.

Even *The Baptist* was effusive in its praise of Shakespeare and its acknowledgement of the 'marvellous achievement'.[30] The success made the assembly 'historic, and probably epoch making', in strengthening the denomination.[31]

The significance of the Twentieth Century Fund for the Baptist community is, indeed, difficult to exaggerate. One of its immediate effects was to increase the standing of Shakespeare, as it was to a large extent his victory. It provided a

foundation for his programme of denominational centralization, enabling changes to be brought about that would otherwise have been far more difficult to achieve. John Clifford's tribute, made in the immediate aftermath of the target being reached, reflected the feelings of the whole denomination,

> Mr Shakespeare knows we have worked for him because we love him ... this Fund is due, in its initiative and in its success, to the much faith, to the fine tact, to the unsleeping devotion, and to the rich courage of our dear friend ... we give thanks to God for this great and precious gift to us as a Baptist Union of our beloved secretary.[32]

The Fund provided, in time, the springboard for possibly the greatest reform Shakespeare steered through - the Ministerial Settlement and Sustentation Scheme, with all its radical implications in terms of Area Superintendents, accreditation procedures and standardized stipends. This did not come into effect until 1916, but the advocacy of such a scheme by Chivers and Shakespeare early in 1902 had brought it to the attention of Baptists. There is no doubt that the momentum provided by the Twentieth Century Fund was an important factor in its coming to fruition.

As the *Baptist Times* had said, the Fund helped to change the meaning of the concept of Denomination. No longer was it simply an umbrella term by which churches which practised believers' baptism and congregational church government identified themselves as such. Rather it was coming to mean a national organization: a body that could be seen, and could act, at that level. This process had begun some years earlier (it was in 1890 that the Baptist Union was first legally incorporated), but it was only in 1902 that it became a practical reality. From then on, in a series of unprecedented Union initiatives, a wide range of national Baptist organizations and departments were created (e.g. a Publications Department - 1902, a Young People's Union - 1904, the Baptist Insurance Company - 1905, the Baptist Historical Society - 1908, the Baptist Ministers' Fraternal Union - 1908, the Baptist Women's Home Work Auxiliary - 1908).

The unification and reorganization of the Home Mission, Augmentation and Church Extension Funds under the general title of 'Baptist Union Home Work' in 1904 was also a direct result of the Twentieth Century Fund. This was more than just an accountancy matter. Churches and pastors that wanted to benefit from Union funds were required to fulfil conditions that limited in significant ways their freedom of action. The 1905 *Baptist Handbook* informed readers that churches wanting help were required to be in Union membership (a large number of Baptist churches had not taken that step); that their pastors needed to satisfy the Union Council as to 'ministerial efficiency'; and that their engagement could be terminated by the Union and the relevant Association at any time.[33]

Arguments about the relative merits of protecting congregational independency on the one hand, and the benefits of a greater degree of connexionalism on the other, have been a constant feature of Baptist church life. This was never more true

than in the early 1900s, when the tide was flowing strongly towards greater connexionalism. The debate featured prominently in both national Assemblies in 1903, and in the pages of the *Baptist Times* throughout the year, largely as a result of proposed changes to the Union's constitution. These were aimed principally at increasing the efficiency and executive power of the Union's Council, at the expense of the two annual Assemblies.

The Assemblies were large popular gatherings of Baptists from all over the country, spread over several days in the spring and autumn. At them the denomination embodied itself, electing the annual President of the Union, receiving inspiration and challenge from leading Baptist figures, hearing news of the progress of the Missionary Society, and passing resolutions on public and denominational issues. However, they were unsuited to the task of governing the modern denomination that Shakespeare envisaged. They were difficult to manage, and subject to being swayed by emotional appeals from the platform. Shakespeare did not succeed in achieving the changes he wanted (among them dropping to one assembly a year), and the new constitution agreed in 1904 was, generally, a maintenance of the *status quo*. His struggles to control the Assemblies continued throughout his time in office.

MINISTERIAL RECOGNITION

One of the key battlefields in the independency versus connexionalism debate was the recognition of ministers. Progress had been made a few years earlier in recognizing those colleges which provided acceptable training,[34] but many pastors did not receive a college training, and the need for a comprehensive national list of accredited Baptist ministers continued to be felt. If the quality, support and deployment of the denomination's ministerial resources were to be improved, the need for defining who was, and who was not, a minister seemed to be essential. It was also important as a basis for deciding who should benefit from Union funds.

In 1899 the Union Council had agreed with the view of its Ministerial Recognition Committee that it was 'desirable' for official Union recognition to precede 'the public Recognition Service' of any new minister.[35] In 1903 Shakespeare introduced a revised scheme for Union recognition, and a new set of regulations were adopted by the Council at the beginning of 1905.[36] Throughout 1906 there was considerable turmoil throughout the country about the way things were going. There was resentment about the way ministers recognized by the Union were distinguished from those who were not in the annual *Handbook*. The Baptist press reflected this discontent. The *Baptist Times* was predictably enthusiastic about the idea of the national management of the ministry: 'What we desire to see is a system which combines efficiency with reasonable security, and that those who separate themselves for the service of the Church shall not so frequently be broken upon the wheel of life.'[37]

The Union President in 1905 was a layman, Judge William Willis KC, and he

made clear in his presidential addresses at both Assemblies that he disapproved of any imposed system of denominational accreditation. The only basis for a man being ordained for ministry among Baptists, he believed, was election by the members of the local church. 'He needs no other sanction', he said.[38] The *Baptist Times* expressed its forthright disagreement with the President, maintaining that congregational independence as a method of ministerial election was disastrously flawed. In a leading article at the close of the year, the writer described the local church's power over its minister as 'inverted popery', as a result of which ministers were forced to become the tool of its deacons, and pleaded, in explicit opposition to Judge Willis, for a coherent, national system.[39]

The Baptist, while acknowledging the need for improvements in ministry, devoted much energy to criticizing the official emphasis on academic study and examinations. It warned of the danger of ending up with ministers who were 'mere school-men, or book-slaves'.[40] Exception was taken to the leadership of J.G. Greenhough, chairman of the Union's Ministerial Recognition Committee from 1896 to 1911, whose conference on the condition of the ministry at the 1903 Spring Assembly introduced, *The Baptist* claimed, 'an objectionable vein of Trade Unionism'.[41] A large number of letters, mainly from ministers, were published in 1904 and 1905, critical of the way the Ministerial Recognition Committee was doing its work, accusing it of clericalism and wanting to 'professionalize' the ministry.

Towards the end of 1905, opposition in *The Baptist* became even more vehement, threatening denominational unity. Calls were made from those who thought the Union was acting oppressively for the formation of an alternative national body, for the benefit of those who valued congregational liberty. The Union had a duty to recognize all pastors chosen by churches, and it was an insult for it not to do so. The 'tyranny' and 'Vaticanism' of the Union was roundly condemned.[42] A letter from D. Ff. Dafis in February 1906 made the connection between the move towards national recognition and the recently acquired wealth of the Union:

> The Baptist Union feels pretty strong and confident now, because it has got the Twentieth Century Fund in its possession. It can hold the purse strings, and compel the recipients thereof to dance to the tune it calls for.[43]

A leading article warned of a forthcoming 'Ecclesiastical Baptist England, with its Provinces and Bishops', in which the minister was merely 'the puppet of a wire puller' at Baptist Church House, if things continued in the way the Union wanted.[44] Such warnings, however, were unable to prevent the acceptance by the Assembly of Greenhough and Shakespeare's scheme in 1907. This involved an elaborate procedure of study, preferably at a recognized college, examinations, and a probationary period, leading to accreditation by the Union.

This was an important step, but was not the end of the story. It was not long before *The Baptist* was blaming the tendency towards professionalism in the ministry for declining vitality in the denomination as a whole. The fact that 1907 was the first

year in living memory that overall membership figures for England and Wales showed a decline added some weight to its charges. Widespread opposition to certain aspects of the scheme led to its modification a few years later. Its basic character, however, has remained intact ever since. In spite of widespread misgivings, the tide was flowing against independency and towards greater connexionalism, and there was nothing either *The Baptist* or the aggrieved, unaccredited ministers could do about it.

BAPTIST CHURCH HOUSE

The impact on the denomination of the opening of Baptist Church House in 1903 was one of the most important consequences of the successful raising of the Twentieth Century Fund. It was said of Shakespeare by a fellow Baptist that 'he found us in a top attic in Furnival Street, and left us in marble halls on Southampton Row.'[45] The offices of the Baptist Missionary Society were at Furnival Street in London and, at the turn of the century, the Union was based in a few rooms rented in the same building. In December 1900, the Eagle Street church, facing substantial redevelopment in the area, made their central London site over to the Union for the construction of a new chapel and denominational headquarters. This was an ideal opportunity to realize one of the main aims of the Fund. As the building began to take shape, the *Baptist Times* proudly boasted that it would be 'the hub of our ecclesiastical universe, and ought to be'.[46]

The opening ceremony took place on 28 April 1903. Its four floors and spacious rooms became the centre of the growing range of Union activity, housing the new departments and hosting the new committees. Visitors were impressed with its 'vaulted ceilings and marble floors', its Council Chamber 'richly panelled in oak and elaborately decorated', and the 'very elaborate ceiling' of the library.[47] Its frontage is described by Clyde Binfield as 'baptist baroque'.[48] Its erection cost over £50,000 -considerably more than the £34,000 originally allowed for it.[49]

The new building had many practical benefits. The accommodation in Furnival Street was hopelessly inadequate, even without Shakespeare's ambitious plans for increased Union activity. It also met another need that many Baptists felt - for a worthy and public expression of their status as a prominent part of national religious life. The Congregationalists had possessed their Memorial Hall since 1875. If Baptists were to be proud of the principles for which they stood, and of their achievements over the previous three centuries, they needed a dignified London headquarters. There were several impressive Baptist church buildings in London, best known being Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle (recently rebuilt after a fire in 1898), but there was nothing to represent adequately the denomination's corporate identity, which Shakespeare and others were so keen to promote. In Binfield's words, once Baptist Church House was opened, 'Baptists were now woven into the fabric of the world's greatest capital city. They were a national force in an international setting.'[50] They could show they had money and knew how to use it

well. They were a people of culture and taste.

Binfield's evaluation of the building's significance draws attention to other, subtler factors:

> A defiantly congregational denomination which refused to see itself as a church had built a Church House, facing Kingsway; Eagle Street meeting had become Kingsgate chapel. Such tribute to Caesar was ambiguous, for which king did baptists serve?[51]

At the time, such doubts were mostly silenced by a sense of pride at what had been achieved. The building represented in a most impressive way the new vision and confidence of the Union, which was coming to represent the denomination as a whole. It was a sign of renewal, and seemed a portent of even greater things that lay in store. Baptist Church House would be, it was hoped, one of the key instruments in enabling the challenge of the twentieth century to be met successfully.

It was not only the denominational headquarters that were housed in premises intended to make a statement about Baptist dignity and status at the dawn of a new century. Each year the *Baptist Handbook* reported on the design and erection of significant Baptist church buildings, and in the early years of the twentieth century this was done in considerable detail and with obvious pride. The 1902 issue described the design of Horfield Baptist Church, Bristol, for example, as 'in the fifteenth century Gothic style', with 'the bold West window ... a rich example of this particular period'.[52] In 1905 the Horsham church buildings had a place, alongside more than forty others, each described in terms that reassured its Baptist readers about the good taste and culture of their denomination:

> There will be a bold seven-light window between the pilasters in the main gable of the church, with projecting narthex below, an octagonal pinnacle on one side of the gable and a bold tower with angle buttresses and spirelet on the other side.[53]

The Baptists had arrived!

THE BAPTIST WORLD ALLIANCE

Global Congregationalist and Methodist bodies had been established before the end of the nineteenth century, with large conferences held in London. It was inevitable that Baptists would want to follow suit and, with a strengthened Union, housed in its own headquarters, led by an ambitious and gifted General Secretary, they had the means to achieve it.

The initial stimulus for a world Baptist conference came from America. A.T. Robertson, in an editorial in January 1904 in the *Baptist Argus* (edited by J.N. Prestridge of Kentucky), suggested a Summer 1905 conference in London on Baptist world problems. Copies were sent to Baptist leaders around the world. Shakespeare took up the challenge with characteristic enthusiasm. The Baptist Missionary Society was willing to co-operate, as were other key figures like Alexander Maclaren and

John Clifford. In October 1904 an invitation was issued to Baptists throughout the world to the First Baptist World Congress in Exeter Hall, London, in July 1905. Shakespeare's organizing genius assured its success.

The tone of the Congress was from the start confident and optimistic. Shakespeare's opening statement affirmed 'We are probably ... the greatest Protestant evangelical community on earth'.[54] Representatives were greeted from many countries, including the persecuted Baptists of Russia and the new churches of Africa. Alexander Maclaren presided, leading the delegates in saying the Apostles' Creed. The final session was a large rally in the Albert Hall, followed next day by a tour of English Baptist heritage sites in Bedford and Cambridge. It was unanimously resolved to form a Baptist World Alliance, with Shakespeare and Prestridge as joint secretaries and convenors of future Congresses, and John Clifford as President.

In his introduction to the authorized record of the proceedings, Shakespeare concluded with these words: 'We have travelled far when it has become possible to federate the great Baptist community for common purposes, and as a demonstration of the fact that there is now in existence, and to be reckoned with, a Baptist world consciousness.'[55]

The Congress and the Alliance were powerful symbols of Baptist strength and progress. The denomination had seemed to many to be lagging behind its Wesleyan and Congregationalist counterparts in terms of denominational organization, but with the dawning of the new century, its star too had appeared on the global stage. The excitement and sense of achievement in the pages of the *Baptist Times* throughout the summer of 1905 is obvious. In November denominational leaders, again including Clifford and Maclaren, gathered in Baptist Church House to honour Shakespeare with a special presentation in appreciation of his two great recent victories - the successful completion of the Twentieth Century Fund and the World Congress.[56] Shakespeare's appointment as one of the two Secretaries of the Alliance, with particular responsibility for Europe, was over the next few years to take up considerable amounts of his time and energy and give to Baptists in England an ever-increasing sense of unity with others abroad.

The massive efforts to bring the Twentieth Century Fund to a successful conclusion, accompanied as they were by great steps forward in securing the effectiveness of the Union and leading to the erection of Baptist Church House, had now been crowned by the spectacle of the representatives of over six million Baptists meeting in London. So much had been done in just a few years; further possibilities for advance seemed limitless.

THE POLITICAL SCENE

The Liberal landslide in the General Election of 1906 was the high-point of Free Church political influence. It was important for Baptists, many of whose leaders played a central part in the campaign. The key issue was the 1902 Education Act,

by means of which Church of England and Roman Catholic elementary schools received financial help out of the rates. 'A classic crusade of unprecedented proportions'[57] was launched by the Free Churches against the Bill when it was proposed and a campaign of 'Passive Resistance' against the payment of rates was promoted when it became law.

The leading Free Church figure was John Clifford, who was the main inspiration behind the Passive Resistance movement, appearing in court over forty times for refusing to pay rates. As far as Baptists were concerned, Clifford was the denomination's elder statesman, having been twice President of the Union, and from 1905 President of the Baptist World Alliance. Huge demonstrations were organized and passions aroused against the legislation's alleged bias in favour of privilege and 'priestism'. Koss's evaluation is that 'Free Church militancy counted as the single most important weapon in the 1906 Liberal armoury'[58] and, in the light of the scale of the victory, Gladstone's view that Nonconformity was 'the backbone of British Liberalism'[59] proved correct once more.

Halévy gives the figure of 180 'Dissenters' elected as members of parliament in 1906.[60] One of the most important was the ambitious young Welsh Baptist, David Lloyd George, who had shared many platforms with Clifford and nurtured the Free Church/Liberal alliance. Other successful candidates from Baptist backgrounds who were to play prominent parts in the Liberal Government included Augustine Birrell and Percy Illingworth.

Education was not the only issue in the campaign and the victory was not due to Free Church campaigning alone, but its scale was nevertheless a breathtaking demonstration of their new-found political strength. The excitement and sense of anticipation at what might be achieved was, at the end of January 1906, enormous. The *Baptist Times* described the election as 'the triumph of Free Churchism', and as portending a political 'revolution'.[61] It gave Nonconformity a sense of having, at last, been recognized, a sense of having shaken off the mantle of obscurity. For the first time ever, their voice would be heard.

CONCLUSION

Baptist development in the years 1901-6 was breathtaking. They were no longer, in 1906, the poor relations among Free Church denominations, and had become the envy of many. In terms of their standing in national life, their denominational organization and resources, and their progress in building foundations for an effective ministry, Baptists had made substantial progress. They were attempting to meet the real and difficult challenge of mission to the urban working class. Why was it, then, that after 1906 membership figures began to fall - a decline that has continued ever since? 'The Arrested Progress of the Church' was the disappointing theme of Shakespeare's address to the Spring Assembly in 1908,[62] and became more and more obvious as the years went by.

Many analyses of the process of secularization have been made. Most of these

have centred on the wider social and intellectual factors affecting society as a whole. Some have addressed the reasons for the particularly dramatic decline of Nonconformity, citing its cultural impoverishment, the loss of identity and purpose once legal disadvantages had been removed, and its irrelevance once the State took over many of its philanthropic activities. Studies by Alan Gilbert have been some of the most perceptive.[63] In particular, his *Religion and Society in Industrial England*, reviewing trends over nearly two centuries prior to the First World War, provides some helpful insights.

Early in the nineteenth century, Gilbert argues, Nonconformity had been a *movement*, relatively unorganized, and characterized by itinerant village preaching where lay-clerical distinctions were unimportant. From about the 1830s it began to take on the character of an *organization*, developing institutions, and a ministry more concerned with pastoral than evangelistic functions.[64] Periodic outbursts of revivalism were only tolerated because of their exceptional and transitory nature, and churches became more and more concerned with their own circle of contacts, rather than the external constituency.[65] Institutionalization and the drive for respectability were shaping the development of Nonconformity, and, in spite of the artificially heightened profile gained by periodic church-chapel conflict, these were steadily sapping it of its potential for growth.

Shakespeare's reforms of 1901-6 should be viewed as a continuation of the same tendency. They were imaginatively conceived and executed with energy, but their effect was to reinforce, rather than counteract, the forces hindering Baptist witness. Strong institutions sapped the energy of a people whose ecclesiological roots lay in the local and the spontaneous rather than the centralized and the organized. Shakespeare's own personal journey of institution building led him, in time, to embrace first the idea of a United Free Church of England and then of unity with the Church of England.[66] It is not surprising that, even as early as 1906, his fellow Baptists were beginning to lose their sense of who they really were and what distinctive things they had to offer. A church's need for a sense of its own particular call from God is greater than its need for efficiency, status and resources. If it loses that sense, it has no right to survive.

NOTES

1 Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A short history*, 1959, p.267.

2 See J.H.Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, Didcot 1994, pp.253-5.

3 According to Briggs, pp.254-5, the total net increase in membership in England and Wales 1900-6 was about 65,000. The increase in 1904-5, which includes the bulk of the Welsh Revival additions, was about 31,000. The total fell by about 16,000 from its 1906 peak by the end of the decade.

4 *Baptist Times and Freeman* (hereafter *BT*) 4 January 1901, p.1.

5 Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London* (3rd series, *Religious Influences*, vol.7, 'Summary'), 1902, p.399.

6 *ibid.*, p.423.

7 General Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, 1890, preface.

8 See H. Edgar Bonsall and Edwin H. Robertson, *The Dream of an Ideal City: Westbourne Park 1877-1977*, 1978.

9 Doris M. Rose, *Baptist Deaconesses*, 1954, p.10.
10 Booth, *op.cit.*, p.123.
11 J.H. Shakespeare, *Baptist Church Extension in Large Towns: A paper read at the Assembly of the Baptist Union*, 1892, p.5.
12 *ibid.*, pp.10-14.
13 *Free Church Year Book* 1900, pp.19-20.
14 John Clifford and J.G. Greenhough.
15 *BT* 14 April 1899, p.225.
16 *BT* 5 January 1900 (Supplement on Twentieth Century Fund), p.(ii).
17 *BT* 28 December 1900, p.1046.
18 *BT* 4 January 1901, p.7.
19 *BT* 26 April 1901 (Supplement on Spring Assembly), p.(ii).
20 J.H. Shakespeare, *The Story of the Twentieth Century Fund*, 1904, p.50.
21 *BT* 18 October 1901 (Supplement on Autumn Assembly), p.(xi).
22 *The Baptist* (hereafter *B*) 4 May 1900, p.280.
23 *B* 18 October 1901, p.248.
24 *BT* 23 August 1901, p.568.
25 *BT* 17 January 1902, pp.46-7.
26 *BT* 11 April 1902, pp.279.
27 *BT* 18 April 1902, p.299.
28 *BT* 9 May 1902 (Supplement on the Spring Assembly), p.(v).
29 *ibid.*
30 *B* 2 May 1902, p.280.
31 *B* 9 May 1902, p.297.
32 Shakespeare, *Twentieth Century Fund*, pp.59-60.
33 *Baptist Handbook* 1905, pp.228-9.
34 Douglas C. Sparkes, *An Accredited Ministry*, Didcot 1996, p.14.
35 Minute Book of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland (hereafter *BU*) 17 and 18 July 1899.
36 *BU* 9 July 1903, 17 January 1905.
37 *BT* 6 January 1905, p. 8.
38 *BT* 6 October 1905 (Supplement on Autumn Assembly).
39 *BT* 22 December 1905, p.896.
40 *B* 1 May 1903, p.280.
41 *B* 8 May 1905, p.296.
42 e.g. see *B* 21 December 1905, p.437.
43 *B* 1 February 1906, p.72.
44 *B* 17 May 1906, p.317.
45 *BT* 15 March 1928.
46 *BT* 11 April 1902, p.278.
47 *BT* 1 January 1904, pp.4-5.
48 Clyde Binfield, 'English Free Churchmen and a National Style' in Stuart Mews, ed., *Religion and National Identity (Studies in Church History* vol.18), Oxford 1982, p.532.
49 Douglas C. Sparkes, *The Offices of the Baptist Union of Great Britain*, Didcot 1996, p.14.
50 Binfield, *op.cit.*, p.532.
51 *ibid.*
52 *Baptist Handbook* 1902, p.347.
53 *Baptist Handbook* 1905, p.464.
54 *First Baptist World Congress: London, July 11-19, 1905: Authorized Record of Proceedings*, 1905, p.1.
55 *ibid.*, p.(ix).
56 *BT* 24 November 1905, p.829.
57 D.W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics 1870-1914*, 1982, p.142.
58 Stephen Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics*, 1975, p.55.
59 Quoted in John F. Glaser, 'English Nonconformity and the Decline of Liberalism', in *American Historical Review*, vol.63, no.2, January 1958, p.352.
60 Elie Halévy, *The Rule of Democracy 1905-14*, 1961, p.64.
61 *BT* 26 January 1906, p.60.
62 J.H. Shakespeare, *The Arrested Progress of the Church: An Address to the Spring Assembly of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 24 April 1908*, 1908.
63 See Alan D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularisation of Modern Society*, 1980, and *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change 1740-1914*, 1976.
64 Gilbert, *Religion*, pp.145-62.
65 *ibid.*, pp.197-9.
66 See J.H. Shakespeare, *The Churches at the Cross Roads: A Study in Church Unity*, 1918.

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