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# THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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### CAPITAL CONGREGATION

An exceptional congregation deserves an exceptional history and this Bloomsbury has secured in Faith Bowers' *A Bold Experiment: The Story of Bloomsbury Chapel and Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church*, 1999 [472pp, £20 + £2 p&p, from Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, 235 Shaftesbury Avenue, London WC2 H 8EL]. The church's foundation was exceptional, for Bloomsbury was built as a speculative venture by Sir Morton Peto whose whole business career was built on successful speculation. The church was built and a pastor appointed before a congregation was collected. Peto was directly responsible for most of the cost, £10,000. The first services were in December 1848, the first members enrolled in July 1849.

This was not the only case in the nineteenth century where strategic thinking moved along lines not apparently ecclesiologically correct. Alternatively, it could be argued that Sir Morton Peto was being realistic about a missionary situation, in which Christ appointed a missionary who, *pace* Andrew Fuller's views (set out in *The Constitution of Apostolic Churches*), gathered a congregation.

The first minister, for whom the historian shows great respect, was William Brock, large in physique and heart, a caring pastor and an innovative evangelist. He was at once evangelical but non-sectarian - a fair portrayal also of Peto's vision for

his new venture. The account does not leave the church in suspense from Sunday to Sunday but helpfully pursues the many faceted work of its diverse agencies, the most significant being the Domestic Mission so ably served by George M'Cree, appointed with Brock before the church itself was constituted.

All this activity placed a heavy responsibility for funding on Bloomsbury's membership whose social profile and working lives are appropriately analysed. Bloomsbury attracted a not surprising genteel membership – no other congregation can surely have numbered as many titled persons in membership over the years – but only about two per cent of the membership's employment and residence details can be traced. The record for those of a lesser social order is sparse, but humbler folk were present in substantial numbers, and not only in associated mission halls.

The study is in two parts forming one whole – the history of Bloomsbury Chapel and the record of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church. Two parts, but one unity because the founding of Peto's 'bold experiment' fell outside regular Baptist ecclesiology, and Brock's work at the Chapel was always supplemented by M'Cree's fascinating endeavours in the Domestic Mission and by other Bloomsbury mission agencies, constructed to engage the multifarious needs of the city. In Part II, this is recognized by the designation 'Central Church' with an intended partnership between church meeting and diaconate on the one hand and on the other, a Central Committee representing wider Baptist interests [the London Baptist Association and the Baptist Union], on the assumption that the witness at Bloomsbury was of strategic importance to the whole denomination, with its service of the city extending beyond the resources and capacity of the local gathered church. An adoption of the Methodist 'forward movement' vision, apposite to the needs of a new century, did not fit easily into a Baptist context, with too little strategic support to the Bloomsbury congregation, except at the inception when some £13,500 was assigned from denominational sources to write off accumulated debts, buy the freehold, and refurbish the premises for the first of only four exceptional twentieth-century ministries: 'Superintendent' Tom Phillips, followed by Townley Lord and Howard Williams, who each served for twenty-eight years, and most recently Barrie Hibbert.

This history indicates that the driving compulsion behind the Bloomsbury agenda, creatively adapted to meet changing needs, was essentially the work of a dedicated membership which, though increasingly scattered in residence throughout Greater London and beyond, has sacrificially upheld the Bloomsbury witness through two world wars, inter-war depression and growing secularization. Commitment to such a vocation was nourished first by mutual commitment amongst the membership, which, never inward-looking, is here characterized by the three words, hospitality, fellowship and friendship. And then by a tradition of fine preaching, which has effectively developed a Christian mind as much as challenging hearts and wills. This editorial is entitled *Capital Congregation* and I think that it is right, but it might equally have been titled *Metropolitan Mission*. Some more penetrating missiological study of the interplay of these two ways of characterizing the Bloomsbury enterprise might be the best tribute we can pay to this excellent exercise in historical analysis.