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Growing in Grace

Congregational Studies Conference 2010

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George Speers
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Congregational Studies Conference
Papers 2010

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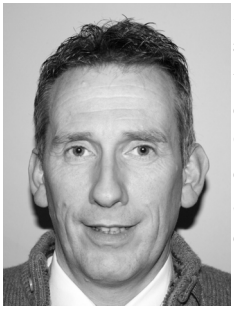
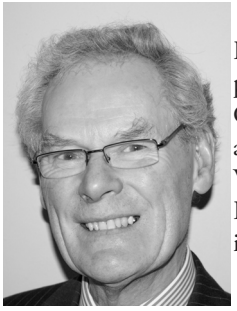
The papers are printed in the order in which they were given at the Conference; as usual the contributor is entirely responsible for the views expressed in his paper.



Dr George Speers trained at the Belfast Bible College and the Reformed Theological College. He has been in the Pastoral ministry for nearly sixteen years and is currently Pastor of Ballynahinch Congregational Church. He often engages in evangelistic missions and convention ministry in his native Northern Ireland. Speaking at a Studies Conference is a new and daunting experience!



Dr Robert Oliver retired in 2006 after thirty-five years as pastor in Bradford on Avon. He is currently lecturer in Church History at the London Theological Seminary and Visiting Professor of Church History at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, and at Puritan Reformed Seminary, Grand Rapids. He has specialised in the history of English Nonconformity.

Photographs by Dr Digby L. James

Foreword

This year's Congregational Studies Conference has seen a change of Chairman. For many years John Semper fulfilled the rôle ably, choosing the subjects and lecturers, chairing the meetings and, with his wife Beryl, editing the papers for publication. We owe John a debt of gratitude for his labours over the years and pray for God's richest blessings upon him in retirement (if a preacher of the Gospel can ever be said to retire).

This year also saw a return to Orange Street Congregational Church in a strategic position in central London for the first time since the early 90s. We are grateful to the church there for their hospitality. Some attendees took the opportunity to pop into the nearby National Portrait Gallery.

George Speers warned us of the length of his paper, which proved to be thoroughly absorbing as he showed the influence and success of Congregationalism in the whole island of Ireland and showed how Gospel truth, unity and fellowship were not restricted by national borders.

Robert Oliver spoke of the labours of one of the unknown heroes of a relatively unknown period of church history: Cornelius Winter. He was more than merely a bridge between the ministry of George Whitefield, whom he accompanied, and William Jay, who he instructed and trained for the ministry. We had some useful discussion about ministerial training and what constituted a minister.

Mention should also be made of Ian Densham's recording of the lectures, a task he has faithfully carried out over the years. Copies of the recordings are available from the EFCC office. Past years' recording (from 1989 onwards) can also be found at www.sermonaudio.com.

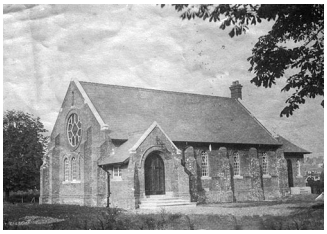
Over the years the printed papers have built up a valuable resource, dealing with matters of Congregational practice, history and doctrine. I encourage all churches to use these in order that we may be better equipped to live godly lives and spread the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of an increasingly wicked world.

Next year's conference will be held on 19 March 2011.

Dr Digby L. James

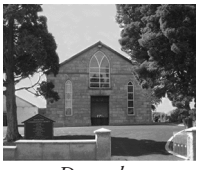
Quinta Church, Weston Rhyn

Ballynahinch (present building)



Ballynahinch (previous building)

John White Memorial



Donaghey

Erne West

Ballymena

Connsbrook Avenue, Belfast

Christ Church, Abbots Cross

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Newtownards

Irish Congregational Churches (images taken from each church's web-site)

The History of Congregationalism in Ireland

George Speers

Introduction

Presently there are twenty seven Congregational Churches in Ireland; twenty five in Northern Ireland and two in the Republic of Ireland. Of the twenty seven churches, twenty six are affiliated to the Congregational Union of Ireland. It might seem that a community so small as that of the Congregational Union of Ireland could have little in its story worth preserving, or of interest to the present generation. However, Congregationalism, which has survived in the face of so many difficulties and despite numerous dark providences and which still shows signs of vibrant life, is as likely as any other church body to have much in its history worth recording and preserving. This paper is not the history of the Congregational Union in Ireland. It is the account of the presence and activities of the Independents in Ireland; it is about the history of Irish Congregationalism and its impact on the evangelisation of what is quaintly known as the 'Emerald Isle.'

Although the Congregational Union of Ireland was formed in 1829, Independents were in Ireland centuries before that time. Their first entry into Ireland as recognized Independents dates from the years of the Commonwealth. If, however, we think of Independency as a form of church polity and thought, rather than a denomination, it can claim a much earlier appearance in Ireland. Dr Alexander Cairns in an unpublished thesis entitled 'The Independents in Ireland—A Short History' suggests that 'Independency has as strong a claim to kinship with the Irish Church of the early centuries as any other denomination.'[1]

Ireland was converted to Christianity at a very early period, and history shows that the church preserved the simplicity of her faith and worship through the centuries. Professor J. Heron, in his book, *The Celtic Church in Ireland,* has said that Ireland was the last nation in Europe to submit to usurpation.[2] Archbishop Ussher stated that in the earliest times there were

1 Alexander Cairns, M.A., Ph.D. Minister of Donegal Street Congregational Church, Belfast, *The Independents in Ireland,* unpublished MS, p. 3

2 J. Heron, *The Celtic Church in Ireland: The Story of Ireland and Irish Christianity from before the Time of St Patrick to the Reformation* (Kessinger Publishing), p. 168.

between four and five hundred churches in Ireland, each having its bishops and deacons, that they were independent of each other and were supported by the voluntary contributions of the people.[3] According to one tradition Patrick founded three hundred and sixty five churches and ordained a similar number of bishops, while another tradition says that he formed seven hundred churches and ordained seven hundred bishops, that is, in either case, a bishop or pastor to each Congregation.

We also learn from the Venerable Bede that in the fourth century Christian missionaries had formed churches and schools in Ireland, and it seems that these Missions were conducted after the manner of Congregational churches.[4] Professor Heron points out that the current practice of diocesan episcopacy was not characteristic of the Celtic church. He describes the system established and practised by Patrick as 'Congregational and tribal Episcopacy.'[5] It is clear that the bishop of those days was not a diocesan dignitary in the modern Episcopal sense. Dr W. Sanday, an Anglican, writes, 'The whole position of the bishop was very similar to that of the incumbent of the parish church of one of the smaller towns.'[6] He adds, 'In some respects the non-conformist communities of our own time furnish a closer parallel to the primitive state of things than an Established church can do.'[7]

It is not necessary to multiply these references to early history. They are not introduced in order to prove that the ancient Celtic church in Ireland was Congregational but merely to illustrate the suggestion that Independency in spirit, if not in name, has been in Ireland for many centuries.

However it can be stated more definitely that soon after the Reformation of the sixteenth century non-conformists came to Ireland. There are indications of the presence of Brownists. Evidence of this is given by Burrage in his book *The Early English Dissenters*—reference is made to Henry Ainsworth, albeit in a derogatory sense. Burrage cites the following from a document by John Paget called 'An Arrow against the Separation of the Brownists' and dated Amsterdam 1618. This is what was written: 'Now you being such an apostate according to your present profession have in sundry times turned back unto the idolatrous false church, as hath by divers persons witnessed. Let it be observed, that you have turned your coat and changed your religion five times, first being of our religion, and a member of the

3 James Ussher, *Religion of the Ancient Irish,* chap. 10. p. 166
4 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History,* www.ccel.org/ccel/bede/history. ii. 4, p. 98.
5 J. Heron, op. cit. p. 167
6 William Sanday, *Form and Content in the Christian tradition: A Friendly Discussion between W. Sanday and N. P. Williams* (Longmans, Green, 1916).
7 Ibid.

Church of England, you forsook the church and separated; Secondly that being separated, you did again in London being in the hands of authority yield to join with worship and ministry of the Church of England; Thirdly that after that you did again slide back unto Separation and renounce the Church of England; Fourthly that after this when you were in Ireland, and in some danger for punishment for your scandal, you did again return unto the communion renounced by you, fainedly or unfainedly, I leave unto yourself to consider; Fifthly, after this you change your profession again and fall back into Separation, and stick presently to this schism.' In the footnote to this statement Burrage writes, 'This statement that Ainsworth went as a Brownist to Ireland is suggestive, for we shall see in 1594 there were Brownists in Ireland.' Ainsworth was probably one of these, and Governor Bradford in 'A Dialogue' says 'Ainsworth came from Holland to Ireland.' Burrage also says in the footnote: 'By 1594 the Separatists had even made their way to Ireland, for Miles Mickle-Bound speaks of "one of them being in Ireland," who wrote in that year to a certain Mr Wood, a Scottish preacher there. Henry Ainsworth was probably one of these Separatists, and may even have written the letter just mentioned.'[8]

Another name to be remembered is that of the Rev. John Hubbard or John Hubbert. He is mentioned by both Burrage and R.W. Dale. Burrage writes of a church formed in London in 1621 'and carried on by one Mr Hubbard or Hubbert, who having renounced his ordination in the Church of England took his ministry of this church and with them (i.e. the church members) went into Ireland and died.'[9] He says the church was evidently organised by a League and Covenant entered into by the members with one another. R.W. Dale informs us that in 1640 there were two churches in London, the Southwark church founded by Henry Jacob in 1616, and a church in Deadman's Place formed in 1621. This church had as its first Pastor 'John Hubbard or John Hubbert. Under stress of persecution he and his church crossed over to Ireland where he died.'[10] The late Professor Scott Pearson of Assembly's College, Belfast, stated that it was to Carrickfergus that Hubbard and his congregation came. Professor Pearson said that when Hubbard came to Carrickfergus about 1621 he was welcomed by the Lord Deputy of Ireland, Sir Arthur Chichester. 'These men and women', writes Pearson, 'who seceded from the Church of England and were Puritans of the left wing, believed in

8 Champlin, Burrage, *The Dissent and Non-Conformity Series, The Early English Dissenters* (B.S.B. 2001), Vol. 1., p. 187

9 R.W. Dale, *The History of Congregationalism from the Apostolic Times to the Present,* www.quintapress.org/PDF_Books.html

10 Ibid.

gathered churches. They were protagonists of uncompromising Free Churchism and advocates of what we now call Congregationalism.'[11] Ken McFall states 'The Rector in St Nicholas's Parish Church in Carrickfergus, the Rev. Mr Openshawe, saw his ministry in 1621 drawing to its conclusion. This provided John Hubbard opportunity to preach from the pulpit in St Nicholas's for a short period of almost two years up until his death in 1623.'[12] In conclusion McFall writes, referring to Carrickfergus Congregational Church, 'Here are really our beginnings as a Church because at this point in history the unfurling of the flag of Independency took place. Most favour the Cromwellian period of around 1650, but the actual date would appear to be the early years of the 1600s. It would also be a grave error and unkind to believe that no traces of the Independent Movement remained in the town after the faithful ministry and death of the Rev. John Hubbard. It is said of the Rev. Timothy Taylor who arrived by the mid 1600s (one of Cromwell's preachers—appointed by Parliament), that his ministry attracted both Independents and Presbyterians, proving that the Independents continued to exist in the town, probably from the time of the Rev. Mr Hubbard's ministry. There is, therefore, good reason to believe that Carrickfergus could claim the first seeds of Independency in Ireland.'[13]

Interestingly James Godkin in his book *Ireland and Her Churches* states that Congregations of Nonconformists were established in Dublin in a very early period after the Reformation. He says that before the reign of Charles II many families of English Puritans and Scots Presbyterians had settled there. Churches were formed which were called Presbyterian, though they were not strictly bound by Presbyterian polity, apparently occupying a position somewhere between Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. Seven congregations were very large and influential. They were started at Wood Street, Cork Street, New Row, Plunkett Street, Capel Street, Ussher's Quay and Abbey Street. Some of these churches were attended by thousands.[14]

Richard L. Greaves is very precise in his contribution to this debate. He argues that the first Independents in Ireland were probably chaplains in the army of Philip Viscount Lisle, who left England in February 1647 for his second tour of duty.[15]

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11 Professor A. F. Scott Pearson, 'Our Presbyterian heritage' in *The Christian Irishman* (Belfast, 1947).
12 Ken McFall, *Under the Shadow of the Battlements—An Historical Look at Carrickfergus Congregational Church* (Fergus Press), p.12
13 Ibid.
14 James Godkin, *Ireland and Her Churches* (London: Chapman and Hall 1867), p. 104.
15 Ibid.

So from this brief survey we can see that Independency existed in Ireland before the time of the Commonwealth. Alexander Cairns gives this synopsis: 'It is not possible to state when Independency or Congregationalism, in the modern sense, first appeared in Ireland. It may, however, be assumed in some form, or under some other name, representatives of the many movements in existence, especially since the time of the Renaissance, towards a new liberty of worship and thought found their way to Ireland.'[16] He adds, 'It can be stated that soon after the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century Nonconformists came to Ireland; and even more confidently it can be said that during the Commonwealth and Protectorate period Independents crossed to Ireland in considerable number.'[17]

1. The Commonwealth and Protectorate (1650–1660)

Cromwell landed at Ringsend near Dublin on 15 August 1649 with thirty five ships. Henry Ireton followed two days later with another seventy seven ships bound for the south; all in all, it was an Armada that crossed the Irish Sea. The day before they embarked was set aside for fasting and prayer. Three ministers prayed for God's blessing, and then the three commanding officers expounded the Word of God to the men. Think of it: an army of 12,000 men spent the day—with swearing and cursing noticeably absent—in reading their Bibles, singing and engaging in religious conversation![18] We know John Owen accompanied the troops as Oliver Cromwell's chaplain. Cromwell, hearing him preach before Parliament, determined to bring him with him to Ireland. At first Owen demurred, because he was at that time preaching at Coggeshall to a Congregation of two thousand. Cromwell however would not be denied. In the summer of 1649 as English troops were preparing for the invasion of Ireland, John Owen delivered a sermon to encourage them in their task. He reminded the soldiers of the terrible atrocities that had been associated with the '9/11' of their day—the sudden rebellion of the Irish Roman Catholics in 1641 when contemporaries estimate, over one hundred thousand Protestant settlers had been massacred in a series of horrific sectarian raids. Owen argued that the rebels had gained control of large parts of Ireland, and were being led by a representative of the Vatican. This papal approval illustrated the political dangers of the Roman Catholic faith. Therefore the duty of English troops was clear—no nation was guiltier of Protestant blood. Ireland was 'The first of the nations that laid in wait for the blood of God's people,' he argued, and so

16 Alexander Cairns, op. cit. p. 31.
17 Ibid.
18 John Owen, *The Works of John Owen,* ed. W.H. Gould (London: Johnson and Hunter 1850–53), vol. 1, p. xliii.

'their latter end shall be to perish forever. They were the sworn vessels of the man of sin, the followers of the beast.'[19] Peter Toon says 'Owen held that in opposing and then executing the King, as well as the invasion of Ireland and then Scotland, the army was doing the will of God. As far as Owen was concerned "The battles fought and the victories won, were clearly prophesied in Revelation 17–19 as part of God's programme for the Last Days."'[20]

What Owen espoused in his sermon was nothing new. Ever since the rebellion, English Puritans longed for the destruction of their enemies in Ireland. Jeremiah Burroughs is well known for the depth of his spiritual counsel, but in 1643 he had imagined 'What vengeance then doth hang over the Anti-Christ, for all the blood of the saints that hath been spilt by him. The scarlet whore hath dyed herself with this blood yea and vengeance will come for the blood that hath been shed of our brethren in Ireland upon any whosoever have been instrumental in it, great or small.'[21]

Cromwell's leading strategists also believed their conquest of Ireland was the first step in a more ambitious programme. Some preachers had their hopes pinned on the conquest of Rome, supposedly in the fulfilment of biblical prophecy. For example in December 1648 Cromwell's chaplain Hugh Peter had called for the removal of monarchies throughout Europe. As John Rogers put it 'Jesuits Cardinals, Pope, yea Rome itself trembles to hear of England and the troubles that are arising in all of Europe.'[22]

Despite his strong support for the military campaign backed by many Independents there seems to be no record of Owen witnessing the military operations his sermon had encouraged. He remained in Dublin (unwell some of the time), preaching frequently and writing, while the soldiers headed north to siege Drogheda and then south to do the same with Wexford. It certainly seems that his frequent preaching had God's hand of blessing upon it. Speaking of his time in Dublin Owen said he carried out 'Constant preaching to numerous multitudes of thirsty people after the gospel as ever I conversed withal.'[23] The few records of conversions from the period illustrate the power of his preaching during his short stay in the capital. As already mentioned he also gave himself to writing. *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ,* Owen's classic study of the atonement, was prepared in Dublin—a book which has enduring significance for thinking evangelicals.

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19 *The Works of John Owen,* op. cit. vol. 8, pp. 231, 235.
20 Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971) p. 49.
21 Jeremiah Burroughs, *An Exposition of Hosea,* vol. 1 (1643), p. 36.
22 John Rogers, *Ohel and Bethshemesh* (1653) p. 526.
23 Peter Toon, *The Correspondence of John Owen, 1616–1683, with the account of his life and work,* ed. with forword by Geoffrey Nuttall.

When the winter stage of the military campaign was completed, Owen returned with Cromwell to England sometime in January 1650. Parliament was not blind to Ireland's spiritual needs. The ideology which fostered English involvement in Irish affairs was also responsible for the application of the only remedy to the enduring 'Irish Problem'—the true trustworthy gospel of God. Owen encouraged MPs to recruit preachers for Gospel Work in Ireland, their aim—promoting Puritan piety. The English MPs believed that the Irish people would be helped and English security guaranteed—by the cultivation of biblically constituted Christian Fellowships. England had a duty to spread the Gospel.

In a sermon to Parliament in February 1650, Owen reflected on his own experiences and appealed that Ireland's spiritual needs should not be forgotten. Owen described his sermon 'The Steadfastness of Promises, and the Sinfulness of Staggering' (1650) as a 'Serious proposal for the advancement and propagation of the Gospel in Ireland.'[24] He confessed 'The tears and cries of the inhabitants of Dublin after the manifestation of Christ are ever in my view. How is it that Jesus Christ is in Ireland only as a lion staining all his garments with the blood of his enemies; and none to hold Him out as a Lamb sprinkled with His own blood to his friends … For my part, I see no further into the mystery of these things but that … the Irish might enjoy Ireland, so long as the moon endureth, so that Jesus Christ might possess the Irish. Do your utmost for the preaching of the gospel in Ireland.'[25]

A mood of opportunity was certainly in the air in the spring of 1650. On the 8 March, Parliament passed the 'Act for the better advancement of the Gospel and Learning in Ireland' and set about recruiting preachers for pastoral work in the Dublin area. Owen's sermon was a call to complete Ireland's failed Reformation which had been directed by Archbishop James Ussher. The Parliamentary Commissioners responsible for the government of Ireland appealed to Owen and Thomas Goodwin to suggest a plan of reform for Trinity College, Dublin.[26] The college had gone downhill since its earlier

24 John Owen, *The steadfastness of promises, and the sinfulness of staggering* (1650), sig. A2v. www.apuritansmind.com/JohnOwen/JohnOwen-Sermon4Staggering.htm.

25 Robert Dunlop, ed., *Ireland under the Commonwealth—Being a Selection of documents relating to the Government of Ireland from 1651–1659* (London: Manchester University Press, 1913), vol. 1, pp.1–2.

26 William Urwick, *The Early History of Trinity College* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892). The author was the son of Dr William Urwick who was for many years minister of York Street Congregational Church, Dublin. This book gives much information about the presence and activities of Independents and Puritan ministers in Dublin and other parts of the country during the Cromwellian occupation. He was the minister at the Congregational Church at St Albans. He notes that John Owen's name appears as one of the trustees appointed by the English Parliament.

glory under the leadership of James Ussher. They were ordered to suppress 'Idolatry, popery, superstition, profaneness, to encourage preachers of the Gospel, and to consider all due ways and means for the advancement and learning of youth in piety and literature.'[27] Owen and Goodwin had the experience of this kind of educational responsibility and the invitation to reform the College was an invitation to influence succeeding generations of theological students.

St John D. Seymour in his book *The Puritans in Ireland* states that on the day that the 'Act for the better advancement of the Gospel and learning in Ireland' was passed it was decided to send six able ministers 'to dispense the gospel in the city of Dublin.'[28] The names of the six were Timothy Taylor, John Rogers, Thomas Higgins, John Bywater, Thomas Harrison and Robert Chambers. Five of these are definitely listed by Seymour as Independents. Robert Chambers was an Episcopalian. The names of all of them appear repeatedly during the succeeding years. They were the forerunners of many others who crossed to Ireland in response to the appeals of Parliament. Seymour calculates that between the years 1651 and the close of 1659 three hundred and seventy six men were engaged as preachers. He gives the names of eighteen Independents, but he also thinks that this is also an underestimate, and that the Independents must have been present in even greater number.[29] In the Irish Congregational Year Book 1878 it is stated that one hundred and fifty ministers came to Ireland, most of them being Independents.[30] It is therefore probable that there were in the country at the time of the Commonwealth more Independents than are accounted for in Seymour's list.

By 1651 Dublin had at least five Independent Congregations, the oldest of which may have been that to which John Rogers[31] began ministering in 1650 in Christ Church. His Congregation attracted leading Cromwellian officials, such as the City's governor Colonel John Hewson. John Rogers was well known in London for his fiery sermons. Also many of his Congregation were soldiers. In 1653 he published a book entitled *Ohel and Bethshemesh* which described what his church was like. Although Rogers' preaching was forthrightly Calvinistic, Rogers did not seem to require subscription to any

27 Robert Dunlop, ed., op. cit. pp. 1–2.
28 St John D. Seymour, *The Puritans in Ireland (1647–1661)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), p. 20.
29 St John D. Seymour, op. cit. pp. 20–39.
30 *Irish Congregational Magazine,* Bound Volume, 1870–1878, Public Records Office (Northern Ireland)
31 On Rogers see Richard L. Greaves, *Rogers, John* (b. 1627). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press)

extended confession of faith. Although his own preference was for the restriction of baptism to professing believers, a particular article of faith was not necessary for church membership. The Christ Church congregation, like the church which John Bunyan would later pastor in Bedford, allowed into membership both Baptists and Pædobaptists. Rogers' church was also keen to promote the public participation of women in public worship. Of course their involvement was carefully restricted, and never exceeded public testimony of how the individual concerned had found faith and so qualified for membership in the gathered church. Rogers's church nevertheless suffered a sharp attack from other Independents for this so called ecclesiastical innovation. His church order was grounded in an intense hope. In his work *Ohel and Bethshemesh* he made extravagant claims about the end of the world, and argued that the sudden increase in the number of independent churches signalled the downfall of episcopalian and presbyterian churches in accordance with Bible Prophecy. He even suggested that the millennium would commence in 1700.

No less prominent was Samuel Winter's Congregation at St Nicholas's. Winter had come to Ireland as a Parliamentary Commissioner. The poor were greatly attracted to his ministry because he distributed quantities of white bread when he had finished his sermon.[32] His theology was highly conservative and well defined and the Congregation included a number of leading society figures. He was described by John Hewson, the governor of Dublin, as a 'godly man.' Winter had a much wider ministry than his Pastorate at St Nicholas's. He was Provost of Trinity College where he instilled a strong Puritan strictness in his administration of the institution. He held this position from 1652 to 1660.[33]

Other Independent Congregations met at St Michan's, where John Murcot was pastor and at St Thomas's the minister was Thomas Higgins, who in 1653 would serve as Chaplain in Hewson's regiment. John Bywater who subsequently moved to Ulster likewise preached in Dublin in 1651. Timothy Taylor who was in Carrickfergus by 1651, undoubtly had some of the Garrison troops in his Congregation. By the following year Thomas Janner was preaching to a Congregation of Independents at the Drogheda Garrison. He would later serve at Limerick (1656) and Carlow (1658). Again James

32 Constantia Maxwell, *A History of Trinity College, Dublin (1592–1892)* with a foreword by G.M. Trevelyan (Dublin: University Press, Trinity College, 1946).

33 On Winter see William Urwick's, *The Early History of Trinity College, Dublin* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), pp. 57–72. Urwick claims that Cromwell confirmed the appointment on 3 June 1652 (p. 59). It was possible that Winter's appointment was assisted by a possible link to the Ussher family.

Wood was Pastor of the independent church at Youghal, as was Edward Wale of Waterford.[34]

By 1654 Samuel Winter's son, Samuel junior, was at Clondalkin, County Dublin. The following year found Edward Veale at Dunboyne, Roger Muckle at Carlow, Nathanial Brewster at St Andrew's in Dublin, Jeremiah Marsden at Armagh and Stephen Charnock ministering to several of the capital's congregations (St Patrick's and St Kevin's in July, St John's in September, St Catherine's in October, and St Werburgh's in November). The demand for ministers greatly exceeded the supply. To address this problem Henry Cromwell's government actively recruited ministers with Thomas Goodwin acting as an agent in England.[35]

R. W. Dale provides additional information of great interest in this connection. He says that several leading members of both houses of Parliament appealed to John Cotton of Boston, Massachusetts in August 1651 to help establish Congregationalism in Ireland. Cotton declined the offer. However the need was so great that they renewed their invitation in March 1656 but again he declined. This did not deter others coming from New England.[36] Eight other names listed by Seymour are marked as 'New England' and we know some of these were Independents. Edward Weld, who was appointed first to Kinsale, is found in Bandon, County Cork in 1656; in the same year John Mill commenced his ministry at Passage, near Waterford. Dr Thomas Harrison, who had ministered in Virginia and Massachusetts before returning to England, went to Ireland as one of Cromwell's Chaplains and in 1655 became the morning preacher at Christ Church, Dublin.

Edmund Calamy gives the following account of Harrison's personality: 'In Dublin he had a flourishing Congregation. He was a most agreeable preacher, and had a peculiar way of insinuating himself into the affections of his hearers … He had an extraordinary gift of prayer; such fluency and such flights of spiritual rhetoric, suited to all occasions and circumstances, as excited the admiration of all who knew him. Lord Thomond (who had no respect for ecclesiastics of any sort) expressed singular value for him and a high opinion of his abilities. He often used to say, "He would rather hear Dr Harrison say grace over an egg, than hear bishops pray and preach."'[37]

Samuel Mather had also been in New England before returning to England, where he served as Chaplain to Magdalen College, Oxford, and

34 Richard L. Greaves, op cit. pp. 22–25
35 Ibid.
36 R.W. Dale, *The History of English Congregationalism,* p. 372
37 Alexander Cairns, op. cit. p. 58.

ministered in Leith in Scotland before accepting an appointment as preacher to the Irish Council and lecturer at Christ Church, Dublin. In December 1656 he became the senior Winter's co-minister at St Nicholas's. Mather's brother Increase left New England to preach at Magherafelt and Ballyscullion, both in Co. Londonderry, in 1657.[38]

During the period of the Commonwealth Congregationalism established a foundation in Ireland. Churches were formed in Dublin, in the main garrison towns like Carrickfergus, Armagh and Londonderry in the North; and Drogheda, Carlow, Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Youghal in the South.[39] However with the end of the Commonwealth and the onset of Restoration the Congregational Cause in Ireland declined and would never again gain any degree of political and social influence in the island. More importantly what can we say about its impact upon the spiritual temperature of Ireland during this period? Well, initially Congregationalism seemed to thrive and then it declined. A number of factors can be identified that explain this oscillation of fortune.

Firstly, although John Owen played a leading and influential role in the advancement and propagation of the Gospel in Ireland, appealing for the recruitment of preachers to give themselves to pastoral work, his interests were more limited. He called for Parliament to sponsor a number of Pastors but they only travelled to meet the spiritual needs of English soldiers and English settlers. They never came with the expressed purpose of evangelising the Catholic natives. John Owen's ministry illustrates this very point. He claimed that he carried out 'Constant preaching to numerous multitudes of thirsty people after the gospel as ever yet I conversed withal.' Undoubtly souls were saved as a result of his preaching but it must be noted that he only preached in Dublin. The capital city, with its riches and English customs, was not representative of the island. Dr Edward Machysaght in *Irish Life in the Seventeenth Century* compared Dublin to that of Hong Kong today whose customs are different from those of China.[40] Owen's Congregations were comprised of government officials and their families, English settlers and soldiers from the Parliamentary Army. There does not seem to be evidence to suggest that Owen ministered to the Irish native population. Crawford Gribben in a paper entitled 'John Owen and Ireland' comments 'Owen's

38 Richard L. Greaves, op cit. pp. 22–25.
39 Phil Kilroy, *Protestant Dissent and Controversy in Ireland 1660–1714* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1994) Chapter relating to the Independents in Ireland 1651–1714, p. 68.
40 Edward Machysaght, *Irish life in the Seventeenth Century,* 3rd edition (Cork: 1969), p. 186.

ambivalent attitude to Ireland typifies that of many of his Puritan peers. Ireland's resilient Catholicism represented acute spiritual needs—and clear political danger. Owen like the Cromwellian administration and Puritans more generally, oscillated between senses of the threat and the opportunity of native Catholicism.'[41]

Secondly, Congregationalism failed to make much of an impact on Irish life because of its support for the political aspirations of the English government. With an English sword in one hand, and the Gospel in the other, preachers were hardly imitating Christ. The Irish natives were seen as a threat to English peace, rather than sinners needing the grace of God. They were to be punished not encouraged to eternal life. Such a strategy would inevitably fail. It is hard for a faith to be taken seriously when it comes with a sword in one hand and a Bible in the other.

Thirdly, one of the basic difficulties in advancing Congregationalism in Ireland related to the primitive state of Gælic publishing. Unlike the situation in other European countries, the reformation in Ireland was driven by a vernacular revolution. In 1571, Queen Elizabeth sent a font of Irish type with the hope that it would be used for a translated Bible.[42] The New Testament was eventually published in 1603. The font however went missing in 1608.[43] Godfrey Daniel took up the challenge in the 1650s. He sought to translate the Old Testament into Gælic. He claimed that 'the value of his project was linked to the value of the people he was trying to reach.'[44] He believed 'a Gælic Bible for a Gælic speaking people would be instrumental to bringing the Irish to ready and cheerful obedience of the Gospel of Christ.'[45] Although Parliament was not against this initiative there was no real desire to ensure the project was completed. English Bibles for English Soldiers and English Colonists were more important than Gælic Bibles for the Roman Catholic natives. Congregationalists attempted to progress without a consistent interest in communicating to natives in a language they preferred. As Patrick Collinson has put it, 'The new faith … never learned to speak Irish.'[46]

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41 Crawford Gribben, Article: 'John Owen and Ireland' at www.johnowen.org/online-articles.

42 T. C. Barnard, *Cromwellian Ireland: English government and reform in Ireland, 1649–1660* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 173–180.

43 Steven G. Ellis, 'Ireland' in Hans J. Hillerbrand (gen. ed.), *The Oxford encyclopædia of the reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 322.

44 Godfrey Daniel, 'To the Right Honourable, the Commissioners to the Parliament of the Commonwealth of England, for the affairs of Ireland,' in William Perkins, *The Christian Doctrine or, The Foundation of Christian Religion, Gathered into Six Principles, translated into Irish by Godfrey Daniel* (Dublin, 1652), sig. A3r.

45 Ibid.

46 Patrick Collinson, *The Reformation* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 2003), p. 118.

Fourthly, theological controversies among Congregationalists and the wider Puritan colonists further hampered any coherent programme of evangelism. They had come to Ireland with the purpose of destroying the influence of the papacy and the Anti-Christ but their project of reformation and evangelism was hampered by disputes. Mention has been made of two Dublin churches: Christ Church pastored by the charismatic John Rogers and St Nicholas's pastored by the conservative Samuel Winter. There were major tensions between these churches because of the differing ministries. This is very significant because this is a microcosm of what was happening in many independent churches and meetings throughout Ireland. Varying views were being espoused on issues such as conversion, baptism, church government, gender, the second coming and the supernatural.[47] This led in some cases to irreconcilable tensions among Independents. Relations deteriorated to the point that the brethren were accusing one another of being Anti-Christ. This internal feuding led to the fragmentation of the Congregational witness in Ireland. It is not surprising that John Rogers in 1653 looked back on his short ministry in Dublin with evident despair saying 'The Lord help poor Ireland! Still the land of idols and ire.'[48]

During the Cromwellian period Congregationalists failed to appeal to the population beyond the Commonwealth Administration. However Samuel Winter in a series of sermons delivered before Charles Fleetwood intimates that there was a small but steady stream of conversions among native Roman Catholics.[49]

2. The Wilderness Years 1660–1800

What happened to the preachers of the Protectorate when the period of the Commonwealth ended? After an interval of many years the Irish Parliament met on 8 May 1661. On 14 May the House of Lords drew up a declaration 'Requiring all the subjects in the Kingdom to conform to Church Government by Episcopacy, and to the use of liturgy as established by law, the Act of Uniformity being unrepealed.'[50] This was sent down to the Commons, who gave it their full support, and the declaration was ordered to be read

47 For in-depth discussion of these theological controversies see Crawford Gribben, *God's Irishmen, Theological Debates in Cromwellian Ireland* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology, Oxford University Press, 2007).

48 John Rogers, (1653), op. cit p. 303.

49 Samuel Winter, *The summe of diverse sermons preached in Dublin, before the L. Deputie Fleetwood, and the Commissioners of Parliament for the affairs of Ireland, wherein the doctrine of infant-baptism is asserted, and the main objections of Mr Tombs, Mr Fisher, Mr Blackwood and others, answered* (Dublin, 1656) p. 173.

50 St John D. Seymour, op. cit. p. 204.

onthe following Sunday by ministers in and about Dublin, and all ministers in other places on the Sunday after it reached them.

This marked the beginning of the end of the Mission of the Congregationalists in Ireland under the Commonwealth. Most of those who were ejected fled to England. A few later returned to Ireland to avoid the Bartholomew Act, and formed congregations principally in Dublin. Stephen Charnock returned in 1670 and ministered at Cork Street. Samuel Marsden died in Ireland in 1677. Dr Thomas Harrison of New England returned to Dublin in 1670 where he died. Samuel Winter was deprived of the Provostship of Trinity College about 1660. The date of his departure from Ireland is not definitely known.

The big question is—whether following the Restoration and the re-instatement of the order of Episcopacy, there remained any results of a permanent nature from the labours of Independents in Ireland during this period under review. Can traces of churches formed by them be found late enough to link up with the history of Congregationalism of the closing years of the eighteenth and opening years of the nineteenth century?

After the Restoration it seems that the Independents enjoyed religious freedom because their number was too small to warrant suppression.

In 1695 Joseph Boyse stated that there were only six Congregations in the whole country. These were New Row in Dublin, Limerick, Cork, Wexford, Carlow and Tipperary.[51] From 1660 onwards the independent churches in Ireland, mainly through the leadership at New Row, particularly Samuel Mather, survived. In addition there was an Independent congregation in Limerick; Gideon Jacque was the Independent minister in Wexford; James Wood ran a school in Tipperary and presumably had a congregation there; another Independent Thomas Jenner wrote his work against the Quakers while living in Carlow;[52] while James Wood in 1680 could say that 'God has blessed some of you with large flocks.'[53] Meanwhile Nathaniel Mather and John Baily were both lamenting how few they were in number. When Baily was imprisoned in Limerick in 1683 he preached to one seventh of his congregation each day; his total Congregation must have been no more than one hundred, given that a large number of people would not have been tolerated in the prison precincts.[54]

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51 Joesph Boyse, *The case of the dissenting Protestants in Ireland in reference to the bill of Indulgence vindicated from the exceptions alleged against it in a late answer* (Dublin: 1695), p. 2.

52 Nathaniel Mather to Increase Mather, 9 Nov. 1682 (The Mather Papers, p. 41 see also p.54); Thomas Baily to Cotton Mather, 6 June 1683 (ibid. p. 491).

53 James Wood, *Shepardy spiritualised* (London: 1680).

54 Cotton Mather, *The life and death of John Baily* (Boston: 1698), p. 38.

The New Row baptismal register, covering the period 1653–1737, provides the most accurate information concerning the numbers in that Congregation in Dublin. At its height New Row could have had around a thousand members. It seems to have been the largest independent church in Ireland.[55] These facts seem to contrast somewhat with statistics given by Richard L. Greaves in his book *God's Other Children.* He says there were 60,000 Congregationalists in Ireland in 1715.[56] If this is the case there must have been more churches or the churches that did exist must have had massive congregations.

The historian J.C. Beckett says 'Accurate Statistics of the distribution of religious denominations in Ireland in the eighteenth century do not exist; but some idea of the size of smaller groups may be gained from the number of Congregations which each possessed in the early nineteenth century. In 1836 there were twenty eight congregations of Independents. Five of these were in Dublin. But none of these can trace a connected history throughout the eighteenth century; though certain Independent congregations in Dublin seem to be directly descended from those formed from ministers who were expelled from their livings in the reign of Charles II.'[57] Information regarding the presence of Independent churches in Ireland during the eighteenth century is not abundant, but it is not altogether lacking.

The following facts are given in Dr William Urwick's address marking the bi-centenary of the Ejection, delivered in Dublin in 1862. He informs us that Nathaniel Mather and was succeeded by his brother Samuel at New Row in Dublin and he was succeeded in 1682 by Nathaniel Weld, son of the Independent Minister at Blarney Castle, County Cork. We are told that Mr Weld's ministry extended over half a century, that is to about 1732–33. The dates are uncertain, as it is stated in the same address that Mr Weld's funeral sermon was preached by his successor Mr John Leland at Eustace Street in the year 1730–31. John Leland was ordained as Weld's assistant in 1716, and as he was still officiating at Eustace Street at the time of Weld's death it may be assumed that his ministry and the life of the church would have continued well into the middle of the eighteenth century. It should be noted that the congregation of New Row had recently transferred to Eustace Street. Urwick adds the information that at the beginning of the eighteenth century there were three other churches in Dublin, one, whose name is not given, in the charge of Mr Travers; one at Cork Street under Thomas Harrison; the third in

55 Phil Kilroy, op. cit. p. 69.
56 Richard L. Greaves, op. cit. p. 7.
57 J.C. Beckett, *Protestant Dissent in Ireland 1687–1780* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), p. 136.

Wood Street. The important relevant fact regarding the last two is that they were still in existence and united as late in the century as 1787.[58]

Another reference clearly bearing upon the matter under consideration is found in the report of the Irish Congregational Union of the year 1835–36. There it is recorded 'The Church last worshipping in Mary's Abbey, Dublin, has ceased to exist as a distinct society.' From reading Godkin's *Ireland and her Churches* we know that this was one of the nonconformist churches that were formed in Dublin in the seventeenth century and had passed into the possession of a Congregation of Independents in later years.[59] Whether it had been continuously in active operation until its closing in 1835 cannot be confidently stated. It is not difficult to conceive that elements or remnants of churches which are known to have survived until towards the end of the eighteenth century were still in existence in 1862, if only in scattered families here and there, and especially in and around the City of Dublin.

It may be assumed also that some of the ministers who came to Ireland during the Protectorate and especially those who returned after their ejection in England (some of whom died in Ireland) had families who made their permanent homes in the country and maintained and passed on through their families the Independent tradition. A reference in Dr Urwick's bi-centenary address proves that this assumption can be justified. Referring to events following the Restoration he said 'Sir Hardross Waller[60], whose descendents are yet among us, made a fruitless effort to retain Dublin for the Parliament.'[61]

It must be admitted, however, that during the years between the death of Cromwell and the Restoration of the monarchy and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Independents were not in Ireland in strength, except in the strength of Independent convictions of the remnant scattered around the land. All that can be said with certainty is that somehow the Independent influence continued to make itself felt until the arrival of the agents of the Irish Evangelical Society and the formation of the Irish Congregational Union at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

It is not without significance that before the I.E.S. began its work in Ireland and before the Congregational Union of Ireland was formed in 1829 there were already a number of churches working on Congregational lines.

58 William Urwick (Junior), *The Life and Letters of William Urwick, of Dublin* (1870; repr. Kissenger Publishing).
59 James Godkin, op. cit. p. 105.
60 Sir Hardross Waller (c.1604–1666) was Major-General in Cromwell's invasion force of Ireland. He was a committed Independent.
61 William Urwick (Junior), op. cit. p. 77.

There were churches at Richhill, Armagh, Moy, Kilkeel, Aughnacloy, Glenvale, and Ballycraigy in the North and Sligo, Cork, Youghal, Carmoney, York Street and Plunkett Street, Dublin in the South. It is also significant that a few of them sprung into life in places visited by Cromwell's preachers. This is true of the older churches in Dublin like Plunkett Street and Poolbeg Street, and Youghal, Cork and Sligo. It would almost be certain of the churches which were immediately formed when the I.E.S. began its widespread itinerant campaign from 1814 onwards. The formation of churches at such historic centres as Londonderry, Carrickfergus, and Limerick give the impression of being revivals rather than new beginnings.

It is worth mentioning a few individual churches by way of illustration. Youghal for instance, listed in the Irish Congregational Year Book for 1882, dates back to 1650. It is also referred to in the Year Book of 1891 as the church which Cromwell and his soldiers worshipped during the campaigns in the South. Congregationalism in Cork also finds its roots in the Cromwellian period. The same might be said of such centres as Londonderry and Carrickfergus, though it would be reasonable to assume that in some cases there were periods when Congregations would cease to meet through stress of circumstances. This is true of the church at Youghal already mentioned. The minutes of the Irish Evangelical Society for October 1823 show that the church had been rebuilt. Rev. John Burnett of Cork was interested in this event and requested a grant towards its restoration and decoration. The church at Plunkett Street, Dublin came into being during the Commonwealth. This church received supplies from England for some time, its first settled Pastor was William Cooper in 1774. He belonged to the Lady Huntingdon Connexion. The name of William Cooper brings the story of the church down well within the nineteenth century. The church and congregation, with their minister were received into the Congregational Union of Ireland in 1836.[62]

It is evident that the link with the seventeenth century is very uncertain. Congregationalism certainly declined during the eighteenth century but the spirit of Cromwell's preachers remained. churches survived after the Commonwealth period and some churches, particularly those in Dublin, experienced considerable blessing. It may be said that that spirit, combined with the new found non-political and purely spiritual nature of churches laid a solid building structure for the evangelistic efforts of the nineteenth century.

62 James Godkin, op. cit. p. 106.

3. The Big Push (1800–1900)

The next stage in the progression of Congregationalism in Ireland is found at the close of the eighteenth century. In Scotland revival swept over the land and reached the North of Ireland. Robert and James Haldane were associated with this movement. Robert the well known commentator on Romans provided means for itinerating preachers in Ireland. In 1801 James Haldane was in Ireland accompanied by Rev. George Hamilton of Armagh. In a letter dated the 5 October he writes, 'I stayed a few days in Belfast and preached in the neighbourhood. There is a great desire to hear in many places and the people are uncommonly attentive. From accounts I hear that religion is at a low ebb.'[63] At this time Arianism had left a dead chill on Irish Presbyterianism.

The Congregational churches at Richhill, Ballycraigy and Donegall Street, Belfast were all founded about this time and owe a debt to these Scottish Brethren, who, if not actually instrumental in their foundation certainly influenced others who were. The Donegall Street Church negotiated a loan from Robert Haldane for five hundred pounds secured by a mortgage deed, to discharge all the outstanding claims in connection with their place of worship.[64]

Concern for evangelistic efforts in Ireland generated by the Evangelical Revival gained further momentum with the establishment of a number of societies for the extension of Christ's Kingdom. Among these were the Hibernian Bible Society, the London Hibernian Society and the Religious Tract Society. The London Hibernian Society founded in 1806 aimed to establish schools and to circulate the Scriptures and preach the Gospel. Regrettably, later it was proposed to drop the last aim. Rev. William Cooper of Plunkett Street, Dublin led strong protests to the committee but the changes were carried through. In response to this the Irish Evangelical Society was formed in London in May 1814. It is true that the Society did not begin its work in Ireland under the name of Independency as a recognised denomination. Its fundamental principle, like that of the London Missionary Society which had formed a few years previously, was non denominational. Its founders and chief supporters were, nevertheless Independents. The I.E.S. had one simple objective—to preach the word of God in Ireland by establishing an Academy in Dublin for the education of native and other young men for the Christian ministry as itinerant preachers and settled Pastors. The Gælic

63 Malcolm Coles, *I Will Build My Church: The story of the Congregational Union of Ireland,* p. 2.

64 James E. Archibald, *A Century of Congregationalism 1801–1901, The Story of Donegall Street Church,* p. 7.

language was to be included in the training. The object in distinction from Episcopalian and Presbyterian Academies was to see that students were well grounded in religious knowledge before entering upon academic training.

Within a period of eighteen years the I.E.S. had established a sizeable work. The Society's Report for 1832 provides a full list of ministers and agents at work in Ireland's four provinces, with their stations. There were fifty four agents at work in the society with one hundred stations.

In Leinster four church buildings were erected in Dublin—Zion, Ebenezer, Rehoboth and Kilmainham Chapels. James Godkin, William Green and William Robertson were also working in Dublin and the wider vicinity, J.B. Grey was working at Bray, John Powell and John Hayes at Naas, J.T. Evision at Maryborough, William Blood at Carlow, Edward Brown and Andrew Stronach at Birr and Edward Dillon at Wexford.

In Ulster John O'Reilly was preaching at Lisbellaw, Co. Fermanagh. James Radcliff in Londonderry, assisted by Charles Creighton. James Dock, William Millar and John Hunter were all working in the vicinity of the City, Robert McMaster was at Ballycraigy, William Flinter and Robert Reilly were serving the works of Carrickfergus and Straid, George Silly was in Armagh, John Carroll at Richill, James Hanson in Bangor, John Mallagh in Kilkeel, Noble Shepperd and Thomas Crawly and Robert Watt in Banbridge. Of this group six were present at the formation of the Irish Congregational Union.

The work of the I.E.S. had progressed in Connaught. E.H. Nolan and John M. Wilson were working in Sligo and Ballinsloe and were assisted by Jeremiah Murray, Thomas Jordan, Samuel Shaw and John E. Fenn. These four brethren had wide itineraries, especially in the Counties of Sligo and Roscommon. Murray, Jordan and Shaw were converted Roman Catholics who were all ordained together at Donegall Street, Belfast, on 12 October 1838.[65] The vast County of Mayo had four men working in it, Christopher Hart at Ballinrobe John McBrien at Ballymacgibbon and John McCready and Samuel McClean from Westport.

There was also a sizeable work being conducted in Munster. James Poole was at Lismore Co. Waterford, and H.G. O'Brien was in the same county but he was at Dungarvan. Arthur Palmer and James Jordan were at Youghal Co. Cork and William Owen and Robert Martin were at Mallow. At Tralee, the main town of County Kerry, William Fordyce and John Kennedy were ministering. Limerick City had three men faithfully upholding a Gospel witness—E. P. Durham, James English and Michael O'Brien. Elsewhere in Co.

65 William Urwick, op. cit. pp. 175–176.

Limerick David Barnet was at Birdhill and William Armstrong was at Rathkeel. James O'Brien was preaching at Ennis Co. Clare and Michael Moran at Nenagh, Co. Tipperary.

This shows that the I.E.S. had literally circled Ireland with the Gospel. The churches which had been established were Independent in character in all respects except in the matter of finance, where they were heavily dependant upon the churches in England, Scotland and Wales.

The inability of the Irish churches to sustain themselves led to problems. The London Committee of the I.E.S. over the years gradually assumed more control of the work of Ireland, much to the displeasure of those in the field. The burden of financial support came from England. London frequently hinted that the churches in Ireland were not doing enough to support the work of the society. Further, insufficient students were coming forward from Ireland. As a result the London Committee decided to close the Academy in Dublin and to dismiss the Dublin Auxiliary Committee of the Society. The Irish brethren strove with little success against 'the unbending officialdom' in London and this led to the formation of the Congregational Union of Ireland in November 1829.[66] Congregationalists in the North of Ireland claimed the right to carry out missionary activities in their own Country and appealed to the churches of Britain for assistance, a right which was being denied them by the I.E.S. What ensued from this was a major fragmentation of the Congregational Cause in Ireland.

Relations between the I.E.S. and the Congregational Union of Ireland were frosty and strained. The I.E.S. refused to yield any of its control and sadly was no longer able to sustain an Independent Mission on the scale at first contemplated and attempted. The London Committee had never been able to obtain financial support adequate for the advance and consolidation of the numerous centres occupied. Even if the income had kept pace with the need, the supply of students for training at the Academy had never been satisfactory.

The extent of the failure of the I.E.S. is revealed by comparing the Society's reports of the years 1832 (which we have had already mentioned) and 1860. Remember in 1832 there were fifty four Ministers and assistant Evangelists and readers employed by the Society. Eleven were in Leinster, eleven in Connaught, Seventeen in Ulster and fifteen in Munster. Two years later in May 1834 the Irish Congregational Record states that there were thirty Independent Ministers; forty Irish Evangelical Society Agents; and thirty churches attended by approximately five thousand people.

66 Alexander Cairns, op. cit. p. 167.

However in 1860 the numbers of Ministers and Agents had been reduced to eighteen. There were fifteen churches with ordained Ministers, and all but two of the churches (Londonderry and Limerick) received aid from the Society. From this date onward the I.E.S. and Congregational Union is found to be working together as one Institution. The Society surrendered much of its work in the Western and Southern Provinces and began to devote its income to strengthening the churches of the Union. This co-operation continued for almost a further four decades, at the end of which the society finally handed over its responsibilities to the care of the Union.

At this point notice must be taken of certain events which materially affected the work and progress of the denomination. In the year 1823 the West of Ireland was visited by a serious famine, and again during the winter of 1846–47, when the potato crop failed. Dr William Urwick writing at the time said, 'The state of the country almost beggars description and what will be the consequences we cannot yet foresee. A general break up is threatened. Famine and disease are sweeping off the population wholesale. Business is at a standstill. Land owners can get neither their rent nor ground. Pauperism prevails in most parts of the Country.'[67] Under Dr Urwick's direction nearly nine thousand five hundred pounds was distributed to help sufferers in connection with Irish Congregational churches and schools as well as the poor in local neighbourhoods in the Dublin area. At least forty thousand pounds was also distributed to the ten western counties of Ireland.

In addition to this, serious emigration was continually draining the Country of its people. Between the years 1841–1881 the population dropped by over three million. In one decade 1841–1851 the decrease was over one and a half million. Over four decades Ireland poured forth its life blood. Ireland has never recovered from these calamities. This had a disastrous effect upon Congregational churches.

The Rev. John White of Belfast, speaking at the Annual Meeting of the Union in 1881 said, 'The number of additions to our churches presents as large an average as those of other denominations in England and Wales, But our ranks are being thinned every year by emigration of our best members.' In the Report of the I.E.S. for 1879 there is further evidence of the difficulties that were being faced. The Report states, 'Our friend Rev. James Bain of Straid says the church has suffered severely by the dispensation of emigration. No less than twenty seven members have left the neighbourhood during the last year. There is an almost overflowing tide from them to Canada, Australia, and New

67 William Urwick, op. cit. pp. 42–82.

Zealand.' This surely is a factor to be remembered in assessing success and failure in connection with Congregationalism's contribution to the evangelisation of Ireland. The significance of this problem is clear—the population of Ireland today is around six and half million; prior to 1841 it was nine million.

Yet in the midst of so many difficulties the Lord brought help to some churches through divine visitation in the form of the 1859 Revival. Here is a brief account of the how revival touched Congregational churches

The Congregational church at Donaghey is a unique fruit of the revival. A local publican, Hugh Kelso, was gloriously converted in February 1859. He immediately gave up his business and commenced to publicly testify to his experience of saving grace.

Many desired to see and hear this publican preacher, and Kelso held crowded meetings in many of the houses of people in the district. A plot of ground was then secured, and on 15 July, 1861, the foundation stone of a new church was laid and the following year it was opened for public worship.

Mr Kelso was unanimously called to be the minister of the newly formed Congregation, and six farmers who became the first deacons guaranteed him his salary.

Hugh Kelso exercised a profitable ministry for two decades and had many souls for his hire. His ministry concluded in 1882.

At Donaghmore the Rev. James Hanson, pastor of the church for 25 years, wrote a letter in 1859, 'I hear strange things, my brother, but I am not able to describe them. The Spirit has fallen upon our people. Many mouths have been opened. Surely the Lord's Spirit is among us.'[68]

The Congregational church in Londonderry under the ministry of Rev. Robert Sewell also experienced a move of the Spirit. Mr Sewell for a year prior to the Revival had been urging Congregationalists to seek the Lord for blessing. He had preached on the subject at the half yearly meeting of the Western Association of Congregational Ministers in 1858.[69] The churches connected with this association were Sligo, Londonderry, Donegal, Ballincarrow and Easkey.[70] When revival came he was so overworked by the demands that in order to save his life he had to leave the scene of his arduous labours.[71]

68 *Irish Congregational Magazine,* 1862, p. 15
69 *Coleraine Chronicle,* 3 July 1858.
70 Alexander Cairns, *The Independents in Ireland—A short history.*
71 I.R.K. Paisley: *The 'Fifty Nine' Revival* (Martyrs Memorial Publications: 1958).

Nearly a decade before the 1859 Revival the Rev. Thomas Puller, the Congregational Minister at Coleraine had sought to teach and preach on the subject of Revival. On the 20 July 1851 in the church he preached on the subject 'What prevents the Revival of Religion of Ireland.'[72] His predecessor the Rev. John Kydd was one of the ministers in Coleraine at the time of the revival. If you go to the old Town Hall in Coleraine you will see the Bible used at the Union Meetings to commemorate the revival and you will see that John Kydd is one of the signatories.

Congregationalists played a leading role in the revival at Coleraine. The different churches of the town asked the renowned evangelist Henry Grattan Guinness to come and preach on the 9 June 1859 at the new market place when the visitation of God commenced. Guinness was born in what was then called Kingstown. An uncle on his father side was associated with the legendary black stout. His father died following a duel with Daniel O'Connell in 1815. Guinness was originally an Irish Congregationalist.[73]

The minute book of Coleraine church notes that after the great open-air meeting 'The meetings were at once continued in the Independent Chapel, which was crowded to overflowing. When the first congregation was in due course dismissed, the building was immediately filled by another, and again, again, and again, as the service was terminated, fresh and eager crowds pressed in. At length the ministers were obliged to conclude, but when they left the building it was only to commence in another way, for they were again up all night praying with seekers after Christ.'[74]

Reporting about the revival John Kydd says that discipleship classes were held on two evenings a week with 40 to 50 converts gathering for instruction. Dr Jim Henry states that 55 members were added to the Congregational church in Coleraine which only had 37 members. As a result a new chapel was built.[75]

Ballycraigy under the ministry of Rev. David Quern was greatly blessed during the 1859 revival. God's moving in a mighty way was evident in the following extract from the diary of William McKinney, published in the book 'Sentry Hill' by Brian Walker. William McKinney then 27 years of age records

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72 Nicholas M. Railton, *Revival on the Causeway Coast* (Fearn, Tain: Christian Focus Publications, 2009).

73 *Londonderry Sentinel,* 12 February, 1858; *Coleraine Chronicle,* 13 October 1860; T.C. Luby, *The life and times of Daniel O'Connell* (Glasgow and London: 1918), pp. 437–46.

74 Benjamin Scott, *The Revival in Ulster, Social and Moral Results* (London: 1859).

75 J.M. Henry, *An Assessment of Social and Religious and Political Aspects of Congregationalism in the Nineteenth Century,* Ph.D. Dissertation Queen's University, Belfast, 1965, p. 263.

how he attended a service at Ballycraigy meeting house on 29 June 1859: 'A number of young friends who seemed unbounded with joy on account of their new born love took me by the hand and asked me was I happy. I felt most unhappy and told them so. They then told me to pray. I requested a number of them to pray for me, which they said they would do. When I got home to my room at 2am I knelt down at my bedside and tried to pray to the Lord to have mercy upon me but I could not. I then began to shed tears and felt as if my heart my breaking.'

The diary continues: 'At half past two o'clock this morning, while I was trying to pray I felt as if enveloped in a cloud of horrid darkness and a terrible weight pressed upon my head, which made me feel as if I was going to be crushed into the earth. Suddenly a sound came into my ears and I felt light and happy immediately after the moment I had heard the sound. After sometime, I had no idea how long, I was aroused by an agreeable tremor in my head and body and felt assured that Jesus died for me. I went to Mrs McGaw's as soon as I got up; met Eliza and Samuel Easton as I went. They shook hands with me and told me I was much better and happier. They had been praying for me. I then went to Hydepark with about 100 converts.'

The change in Mr McKinney's life did not end there; rather it marked the start of his service for God. Records in Ballycraigy Church state that he taught Sunday school for many years and attended the Prayer Meeting.

Straid in 1859 was a small village. The people of Straid were mainly farmers and weavers. In the centre of the village, there was a Congregational church that was led by an able pastor named James Bain. For some time prior to the commencement of the revival, the spirit of prayer among the members of the church had intensified. Prayer for an outpouring of the Spirit of God was fervent, resulting in growing congregations.

At the beginning of April 1859, Bain heard news of what he called 'strange things' happening in other parts of the country. However, differing opinions were expressed to him about the genuineness of these unusual spiritual phenomena, so he decided it was best to go and see for himself. What he observed deeply impressed him: 'I felt a deep interest in what I had heard, but I required facts to be fully impressed with its divine character. To see the proud sinner stricken and constrained to cry for mercy before an assembled multitude was such an evidence of the heavenly origin of the work to convince the gainsayer, and to give confidence to the sincere enquirer after truth. It was truly a wonderful manifestation of Divine power.'[76]

76 William Gibson, *The Year of Grace a history of the Ulster revival of 1859* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co. 1860).

In spite of what he saw, Bain was still hesitant to promote the interests of what was happening elsewhere among his people. He wanted to be perfectly satisfied about the revival's authenticity before he took a single step to encourage it. However, when he finally became fully convinced that the movement was of God, he threw his whole soul into the great work.

God was soon at work in Straid, and the evidence of that fact was clearly manifest. The whole society was being profoundly affected by what God was doing in their midst. The cockfighting pit, which had been a place for vice of the worst kind, became a preaching point where many were won to Christ. Public bars began to close, and profanity and drunkenness, which characterized many lives, were set aside as the Spirit of God moved through the community.

Bain's personal records indicate that a desire for the preaching of the gospel was everywhere, pervading society, and that most people were eager to listen. Large crowds attended wherever the Word of God was preached, and the work of the Spirit was very great. Many came to rejoice in Jesus who before seemed impossible to bring to the truth because of their hatred and rebellion.

Bain described a typical Sabbath during those revival days: 'Our Sabbath services are continuous, from nine in the morning until ten at night. We are engaged from nine to twelve in prayer meetings for the young, from twelve to two in public service, from two to four in prayer meetings, from five to eight in the evening service, and finally in our evening prayer meeting.'[77]

The evening services at the church became so well attended that the only suitable place to assemble was outdoors. At one of these evening gatherings, some of the new converts gave testimony, and Bain preached two sermons. The whole audience was gripped with a sense of intense spiritual anxiety. Numbers cried for mercy, and not a single soul departed from that scene until morning.

The journey home from the meetings was characterized by prayer and praise. One observer recalled their practice during those days: 'They go home in parties, and sing as they go. Then, when a group is to break off in a different direction, a hymn is sung and a prayer offered where they part, and their prayer and praise may be heard on the lonely brow of the mountains at midnight, in strains so full of faith and love to Jesus, that the heart would be hard indeed that would not be melted by the strangely solemn sound.'[78]

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.

Bain describes how, on occasion, he was called to homes some distance from the church to help souls who were in agonies of conviction over their sin. On his walk back home, he would be called into other houses to help those in similar circumstances. Having helped numbers of distraught souls to Christ, he would continue homeward. After one such outing, he recorded, 'I left and enjoyed a most delightful walk home, filled with sweet thoughts on heavenly things, my meditation unbroken, except by the voice of praise which rose from some of the cottages along my path as I passed along.'[79]

Open-air preaching was common during the revival, and Bain held many outdoor services. One such open-air gathering was held on a hill not far from Straid Village. It was a Tuesday evening, and it was sunny and clear, so that from this elevated site the hills of Scotland could be seen. Upward of three thousand people attended, and Bain preached the everlasting gospel. He recalls: 'The first part of the service continued for three-quarters of an hour. One of the converts gave out a Psalm and prayed, and again I addressed the people in pointed language for half-an-hour. Towards the end of the address, several were converted and moved to another part of the ground. As I pronounced the benediction, every soul was touched, and all seemed unwilling to depart. Many were now anxious … They stayed in prayer and praise until the silvery beams of the moon gave interest and beauty to the scene.'[80]

Following some of those open-air meetings, the people would return to the church, light the lamps, and continue until midnight and sometimes into the early morning. The participants seemed to forget that there was any other business in the world.

Children also came under the influence of the revival. Although Bain gave oversight to this aspect of the Spirit's work, he was assisted by his wife and at least one of his young daughters. On a particular Sabbath, a prayer meeting was held by the children from eight to twelve years of age. As they were in prayer, eight of them came under deep conviction of sin and need. Later the whole assembly of children felt God's power among them. Bain said afterward that he had never witnessed such a scene. Children cried for mercy with indescribable earnestness. He left the children in the care of his wife in the manse while he proceeded to the church for the service. As the service in the sanctuary was nearing an end, singing could be heard coming from the house, and later twenty newly converted children took their seats in the church before the pulpit. At the evening service, eight more children were converted, and others came to Christ during the week that followed.

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.

Eternity alone will reveal the extent of the powerful and mighty work of God in 1859 around the village of Straid. In that summer alone, Bain added sixty-nine new members to the fellowship of his church, and he reported that he had conversed with more than four hundred who had found peace with Jesus Christ.

In concluding his own personal account of what he experienced, Bain wrote:

'I might enlarge on this glorious work of grace and mercy, but I conclude, praying it may be continued and enlarged. It is now Christmas, in the depth of one of the most severe winters we have had for many years, and yet the work of revival goes on, though not so open and striking as it was during the summer, yet by the still small voice, many are brought to Him in Whom to believe is life. May the Lord be more and more manifest among us by the convicting, converting, and sanctifying power of His Spirit! Amen.'[81]

Congregational churches in the south of Ireland also experience revival blessing. William Henry Harding in his book *Ulster Revival of 1859* says about the West of Ireland 'Even in the dark regions of the south and west—dark because under the sway of the priest—there were springings of the water of life.'[82] Under the daily preaching of Mr Grattan Guinness great numbers were impressed at Limerick. The Congregational Church in Limerick was helped. Rev. J.C. Beadle reported that Revival had come to the church.[83] Also the Congregational Year Book for 1880 says 'at Tralee the church which had settled down to formality and apathy was re-animated.'[84]

In Dublin, the Rev. J. Denham Smith, an Englishman who passed through the Dublin Academy during the principal-ship of Dr Urwick, ministered for 14 years to a new church formed at Kingstown (Dún Laoghaire). In June 1859 an extraordinary awakening took place, with thousands of people turning to Christ. To cope with the crowds the Congregationalists in Kingstown (Dún Laoghaire) hired the Metropolitan Hall in Dublin. Thousands flocked to hear the Gospel and often remained hour after hour, so that the meetings were continued until late at night. As a result the premises at Kingstown (Dún Laoghaire) having been enlarged was still too small and so Merrion Hall was built to accommodate the crowds attending his ministry. God was gracious to use Mr Smith's evangelistic gifts in

81 Ibid.
82 William Henry Harding, *Ulster Revival in 1859* (London: Morgan & Scott Limited, 1860), p. 21
83 Malcolm Coles, op. cit. p. 12.
84 *Irish Congregational Magazine,* 1862, p. 15.

other parts of the South. There were many conversions in county Carlow, under his preaching.[85]

One result of the Kingstown work was the conversion of almost the whole of the crews of the four steamboats crossing the Irish Channel. Meetings for praise and prayer were held by the sailors whenever they were in harbour, and when the cabins proved too small preaching was commenced from the deck of one or another of the boats moored along the quay, on Sunday afternoons, so that 'some of the scenes on the shore of the Lake of Galilee were reproduced in the harbour of Kingstown.'[86]

Donegal Street Church was blessed during the revival. Under the guidance of Rev. John Bagley who came from the Congregational church in Galway in 1857, God moved powerfully, the congregation grew and a new church was erected in March 1860.[87]

It was against this background of revival that the Congregational Union of Ireland was reformed in 1860. It had not functioned for some twelve to thirteen years. This important event took place in Dublin on 29 March 1860 in York Street Chapel.

1860 was a definitive year for Congregational churches in the North of Ireland. From 1860 to the beginning of the twentieth century Congregationalism pushed forward in Ulster. Churches were vibrant with an evident touch upon their witness; concerted efforts were made and new churches were planted.

A picture of the spiritual vibrancy of churches can be gleaned by trawling through the Irish Congregational Magazine. The Magazine records in 1875 'Notwithstanding recent enlargement, the church in Donegall Street, Belfast had for a length of time been quite unable to accommodate the large numbers who came to the services, and the Deacons found it utterly impossible to provide sittings for those who wished to become members of the Congregation. As a result they have secured a site on Clifton Park Avenue, a short distance from the Crumlin Road.'[88] We know that a new church building was erected the same year.

Rev. David Robb the minister of Coleraine writes: 'Age and youth, from ninety to nine are rejoicing together … out of a family of six children, five

85 William Henry Harding, op. cit. p. 22.
86 Ibid.
87 Alexander Cairns, op. cit. p. 160
88 *Irish Congregational Magazine,* 1875, Vol. 14, edited by Rev. J. White, Published by William W. Clelland, p. 203 (Archives Linenhall Library, Belfast).

have been converted—three of them found salvation in the absence of their father; with their mother, they were holding family worship.'[89]

Speaking about the work at Ebenezer Chapel, Newry, and the Rev. George Wright says, 'As regards the good done in my own Church by this work, I have to say that the attendances are improving, especially the Sunday evening service. After that meeting some fifty to sixty stay for a prayer meeting at the close and generally one or two anxious ones are spoken to. There was also a larger number who stayed for Communion Sunday last than ever did since I settled here, and some of them were those who profess lately to have been brought to Christ.'[90]

The same spiritual vitality was evident at the church in Moy, Co. Tyrone. The report about this church says, 'This little Church in this neighbourhood is now lifting up its head … The Rev. A.J. Lewis has eleven country stations, which he has regularly attended for three months and all of them crowded indeed, in many cases we can scarcely find room for the people.'[91]

Moving to Carrickfergus the Rev. William Flinter reports, 'There is neither wildness nor undue excitement, such as in many places appeared in 1859. We have on several occasions for some years, held special meetings to pray for revival, and I have observed that after each of these occasions the Lord gave us unmistakeable tokens for good,—God's people were encouraged and souls were converted.'[92]

The same happenings were being echoed by the church at Lisburn in 1874. 'In Lisburn there have been many conversions. We were at two meetings in the Independent Church which were largely attended; for deep seriousness and intense anxiety we have rarely been in better meetings. A great number of anxious enquirers waited at each meeting to be directed and prayed for, and several went home rejoicing in Christ as their Saviour. We are told in all their meetings there are similar results.'[93] From these reports it is evident that some ministers felt that in the years 1874 and 1875 a deeper work of the spirit was manifest than that which had been experienced in 1859.

The Spirit's stirrings upon the churches generated a desire for evangelistic endeavour. In 1878 meetings were held throughout the North in forty different places. Ardara, Armagh, Ballyleaney, Ballyleese, Ballylig, Ballymena, Bessbrook, Broughshane, Cairncastle, Castlefin, Clonagtrace, Coleraine,

89 *Irish Congregational Magazine,* 1875, p. 12.
90 *Irish Congregational Magazine,* 1875, p. 34.
91 *Irish Congregational Magazine,* 1874, Vol. 13, edited by Rev. J. White, Published by William W. Clelland, p. 203 (Archives Linenhall Library, Belfast).
92 *Irish Congregational Magazine,* 1875, p. 77.
93 *Irish Congregational Magazine,* 1874, pp. 50–51.

Donaghey, Donegal, Dooran, Donkinealey, Limavady, Lisburn, Lisnamurrican, Londonderry, Newry, Newtownstewart, Omagh, Omeath, Richhill, Roscaven, Rosemount, Sheeptown, St Johnston, Strabane and Warrenpoint. As a result of these endeavours churches were established in Castlefin, Co. Donegal and Larne, Co. Antrim.

It seems that this desire to reach out marked the lives of Congregational churches right up to the end of the nineteenth the century. Rev. Cyril Nicholas the first minister of Abbots Cross in an article in *The Congregationalist* dated August 1952 says of the period 1854 to1885 'It was the most glorious period of Church extension.'[94] His assessment is accurate. Between, 1854–1899 twelve new churches were established; Galway (1854) and Merrion Hall, Dublin (1863), Albertbridge (1862) which was at one time the only church in lower East Belfast ministering to the working class; Castlefin (1878), Ballymena (1883), Donnybrook Avenue (1899), Donaghey (1860), Larne (1878), Lisburn (1873), John White Memorial (1894), White Abbey (1885), and Clifton Park Avenue (1873). Two Evangelical Union churches—connected with the Evangelical Union of Scotland—one at Wellington Place and the other at Spamount were received into the Union in 1895. Donegall Street Congregational Church was responsible for helping establish the churches at Albertbridge, Clifton Park Avenue, and John White Memorial.

From 1850 to the end of the nineteenth century fourteen new churches joined the Congregational Union of Ireland. Twelve new churches were formed; five of these in the City of Belfast, ten in the north of Ireland and only two in the South. Referring to Belfast the Rev. James E. Archibald said, 'Congregationalism was elevated to a position in Belfast to which it had hitherto been a stranger.'[95] However this only tells part of the story. During the same period thirteen churches were closed. Five churches in Dublin, Kings Inn Street, Ebenezer Chapel, Rehoboth Chapel, Great Brunswick Street, and Plunkett Street. The other closures were Donegal town, Maryborough, Mallow, Tralee, Youghal, Limavady, Moy and Armagh. This period marked the retreat of Congregationalism from the South of Ireland. However it must be noted that shrinkage was not just confined to the Congregational cause; all protestant denominations were experiencing regression. Congregationalism being much smaller felt it more keenly.

What was the reason for this retreat? Firstly, emigration, which we have already mentioned, was taking its toll. Vast numbers of the Protestant

94 Rev. Cyril Nicholas, *The Congregationalist,* August 1952, Edited by Rev. George Bembridge, Vol. xcl, No. 8.
95 James E. Archibald, op. cit. p. 24.

population were leaving the rural poverty stricken south and seeking new lives in America, Canada and Australia. Secondly, the Irish Evangelical Society had embarked upon an ambitious plan for reaching the Roman Catholic population in the Western and Southern Counties; however the Society was unable to sustain the work financially. Its policy of non co-operation with the Congregational Union further exacerbated the situation. Thirdly, a glance at the list of churches and pastors given in the Year Book of any of the years mentioned during this period reveals that a considerable number were from across the Irish Sea. It was natural that these men, with few exceptions, should return to their native heath. They were brave men and most of them gave good account of themselves while labouring in the midst of the particular difficulties and the discouragements inseparable from work in a predominantly Roman Catholic country. Nevertheless it must be admitted that the fact that churches having been under the necessity of supplying their pulpits to such an extent by men from England, and the fact that the average length of their pastorates was short, was a serious hindrance to Congregational churches from the point of view of evangelism and of building up even moderately strong Congregations.

The printed reports of both the Irish Evangelical Society and the Congregational Union of Ireland leave the impression, indeed, of something of a procession in the comings and goings of ministers and reoccurring pulpit vacancies. The Rev. John White who during his great ministry in Belfast was in close touch with the problems confronting the churches, constantly pointed to the frequent removal of ministers from Ireland as the greatest problem churches had to contend with in the nineteenth century. At the Annual Meeting of the Union in 1881 he lamented 'The frequent changes and long vacancies in the pastorates … cause us to lose every year many that, not from choice, but necessity go to other Churches.'[96]

4. From Regression to Stabilization (1900–2010)

The optimism generated by the evangelistic endeavours of the nineteenth century was to stagnate during the first half of the twentieth century. One reason for this standstill was the growing political crisis surrounding Home Rule. The Home Rule Crisis had been a festering sore since 1886. The matter was raised in the Executive Committee of the Union in Belfast in March 1893. A long discussion took place on drawing up a resolution on the subject. The following resolution and petition was approved:

96 Minutes of the Congregational Union of Ireland, May 1881.

Resolution—'Considering the grave nature of the present political crisis, we the Executive Committee of the Congregational Union of Ireland, respectfully urge members and adherents of our Churches to consider whether it is not their duty as Congregationalists as well as citizens to protest against the Government of Ireland Bill now before the Country and for the purpose we beg to submit the following petition for approval.'[97]

Petition—'We the undersigned members and adherents of the Congregational churches in Ireland view with serious misgivings the proposal embodied in the Government of Ireland Bill and are of the opinion that in the event of becoming law serious injury would be inflicted upon many of the prosperous and loyal section of the community. This being our firm conviction based upon intimate acquaintance with the conditions of life here, we earnestly appealed to our brethren in England, Scotland and Wales to do all in their power to avert the danger which threatens us.'[98]

Churches in the Northern Protestant Counties which were predominantly unionist had no problem assenting to this petition. For the churches in the Southern Counties which were principally Roman Catholic and nationalist it was different story. They would certainly receive no sympathy from their Roman Catholic neighbours. There was nowhere in Europe more devoted to the Church of Rome than the Roman Catholic South. Congregational churches under the auspices of the I.E.S. had laboured in the Southern and Western Counties with the expressed purpose of reaching the Roman Catholic masses. This had been a slow arduous task which yielded limited fruit. Now with the added dimension of politics the remaining churches in the South would find their task even more difficult.

The situation was further aggravated by the Easter Rising of 1916, the eventual partition of Ireland in 1921 and the subsequent Civil War in the South 1922–23. These events greatly impacted the remaining churches in the Free State. A pathetic letter from the York Street Church in Dublin to the Congregational Union of England and Wales dated 13 February 1923, seeking financial assistance, was an indication of the dark days through which the Lord's people were passing. The church had been labouring under the treble disadvantage of a 'down town' situation in the midst of a Roman Catholic population in a country disabled by Civil War. For a long time there had been a steady decline in numbers and the hand of death had removed older members. The church stated 'Since the rebellion of 1916 and the consequent Civil War, which continues, many Protestants including some of our own

97 Minutes of the Congregational Union of Ireland, March 1893.
98 Ibid.

members have left the Country.'[99] A similar story could be told in other churches. Between 1900–1950 the churches in Limerick, Kingstown, Sligo, Galway and York Street ceased to exist.

How did the churches in the North contend with the political upheaval? Generally the churches survived and maintained a Gospel witness. Even in the midst of civil unrest in 1921 Belfast experienced Revival under the ministry of W.P. Nicholson and Congregational churches in Belfast once again benefited from this move of God. However this blessing was short lived and the effects of two World Wars took its toll on a number of Congregations. In particular, as a result of the Second World War, much of the national life became disrupted and the life of the churches suffered immensely. This was a drawback in the extension of Congregationalism. In fact at the end of the Second World War Coleraine and Ballymena Churches were in real financial difficulties. Four churches closed—Ballyclare, Newry, Londonderry and Larne. Larne however was re-opened within a year of closing. To compensate for these closures three new churches were established Bloomfield (1901), Ballynahinch (1902) and Cregagh (1938) which was established as extension of the work of Albertbridge.

The church at Ballynahinch had a rather unique beginning. It was conceived out of the Home Rule Crisis. The three Presbyterian Ministers in the town supported the Home Rule Bill. The vast majority of people strongly opposed Home Rule and could not accept or support it. Oral evidence tells that a number of men actually walked out of the Sunday morning Service in 1st Presbyterian Church on 9 February 1902. On Thursday 13 February 1902 at 6.30pm a Public Meeting was held in the Courthouse. The *Down Recorder* of 15 February 1902 records this as an 'Ecclesiastical Split' and reports, 'a large meeting of over two hundred people, principally farmers.' The meeting was addressed by the Rev. Mr Miskimmin (Congregational Minister in Newry) and Rev. G.M. Black (Belfast). The principles of Independency were explained and the seriousness of the step they were contemplating stressed. Mr Miskimmin reminded all present that a careful enquiry into the prospects of a new church should be made, and if there was not good reason to expect a thoroughly successful work, then they should abandon the idea and return to their own churches. However this remark was greeted by calls of 'Never, Never, Never.' Although Ballynahinch church was established as a result of a political dispute, today it maintains a strong Evangelical witness.[100]

99 Malcolm Coles, op. cit. p. 29.

So Congregationalism during the first fifty years of the twentieth struggled to extend its borders. It was hampered by political upheaval, civil unrest, and two World Wars. But there was one more emerging difficulty which contributed to a very real retreat in the work and witness of the denomination. Tudur Jones writing of English Congregationalism says 'In 1900 Congregationalism found itself face to face with several difficult theological and intellectual questions. Biblical criticism had been accepted by the majority of the intellectual leaders of the denomination and a Liberal Modernist theology was following in its wake and many of the younger ministers and lay men found it more satisfying than the theology of their fathers.'[101] He says 'It was becoming increasingly fashionable to emphasise experience at the expense of doctrine, to exalt morality and social action; to disparage private piety and worship as matters of quite secondary importance in religion, to magnify the Fatherhood of God at the price of minimising His righteousness and holiness. Consistent with this type of approach the authority accorded to the Bible by Protestant tradition was felt too excessive. The authoritative element in Scripture was the character and the teaching of the Jesus that lived in Palestine. Thus the quest for the "Historical Jesus" began. The simple Gospel message was that all men are brothers and that God is their Father. By thus remoulding traditional Christianity, it was hoped to gather modern man into the fold of faith.'[102]

It is true that as far as Ireland was concerned, the Union and the churches at first did not feel the impact of the changes that were taking place in Great Britain. However note was being taken of these developments. The editor of the *Irish Congregational Magazine* in 1888 referring to Darwin's *Origin of the Species* stated, 'We do not think that his doctrine is necessarily atheistic.' The magazine also took note of various books being published which were raising questions about 'Advent of Christ' and of 'Future Punishment.' So there was an awareness of this 'New Theology'.

Malcolm Coles points out that students from the English colleges where the New Theology, was in vogue, were introduced to the Irish churches. In 1890, out of the nineteen trained ministers no less than fifteen received their training in England. The churches at Sligo and Londonderry received men trained at Mansfield College, Oxford. No doubt they imbibed something of their Principal, Dr A.B. Fairbairn.[103] Tudur Jones says of him, 'He was pre-

100 B. McKee, *The History of Ballynahinch Congregational Church,* p. 8.
101 R. Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England 1662–1962* (London: Independent Press, 1962), pp. 347–348.
102 Ibid.

eminently the link between the Victorian religious world and that of the twentieth century, and his theology was a "mediating theology".'[104] He suggests that Fairbairn was the founder of Liberal Evangelicalism amongst Congregationalist. He was present in 1904 at the Annual Meetings of the Union.

The New Theology and its associated ideas were also introduced by visiting delegates to the Annual Meetings, who came from Scotland and England. At the 1898 Annual Meetings Dr Albert Goodrich was one of the English delegates. He was one of the leading exponents of the Social Gospel. At the 75th Annual Meetings in 1904 held in Londonderry, the celebrated R.J. Campbell of the City Temple, London, was the main delegate from England. He addressed the Union and a public meeting at night in the Guild Hall. Campbell was a leading exponent of the 'New Theology' and published a book by that name in 1907. In his book he rejects orthodox teaching about man's fall and God's wrath. He also stated that by his death, Jesus did not atone for anything. To this kind of teaching the Ministers and people of the Irish churches were exposed. Undoubtly the churches were infiltrated with this New Theology which led to doctrinal declension and consequently it stunted aggressive evangelism. This period seems to indicate a very real retreat in the work and witness of a number of churches.

Let us remind ourselves of some statistics as we evaluate the Congregational cause of Ireland from 1950 to the present day. In 1834 there were thirty Independent Ministers; forty Irish Evangelical agents; thirty churches attended by approximately five thousand people. By 1860 the numbers of ministers and agents had been reduced to eighteen. There were fifteen churches with ordained ministers and all but two of the churches—Londonderry and Limerick—received aid from the I.E.S. With the dawning of the twentieth century the pendulum had moved again. There were twenty eight churches, twenty ministers and eight churches vacant. No reference is made to preaching stations. In the Congregational year book for 1952 we find that there are thirty six places of worship with a combined membership of one thousand seven hundred and fifty two. Cyril Nicholas says 'Of these, only two dozen are active centres of Congregational worship, and the number of really active Congregationalists will be lower than this number, though one must remember there are a great number of adherents in our Churches who are not Church Members.'[105] He adds 'Out of two dozen Churches half of them are located in the City of Belfast, and it is a disturbing fact to Congregationalists

103 Malcolm Coles, op. cit. p.16.
104 R. Tudur Jones, op. cit. pp. 268–269.

to discover that there is at present no Congregational witness in the historic towns of Armagh, Enniskillen, Londonderry, Newry, Newtownards, Omagh and Portadown. Great new communities are springing up around our towns, with as yet no Congregational witness.'[106] Essentially, from 1834 the story of Congregationalism in Ireland has been an oscillating one of advance and decline.

Comment must be made in respect to Cyril Nicholas's assessment of the health of Congregationalism. He makes it from a Northern Irish mindset. No reference is made to evangelising and re-establishing churches in the South. By the mid 1950s only three small churches remained in the Republic of Ireland—Kilmainham (Dublin) and St Johnston and Castlefin (Donegal). With partition in 1921 Congregationalism retreated behind the borders of the Protestant North and deserted the South. The political landscape of the day certainly influenced this withdrawal. Between 1921 and 1973 relations between the governments of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland were non existent. Northern Irish Protestants perceived that the Republic was a threat to religious liberty and British sovereignty. The Congregational Union's desire to extend its work ranged within the parameters of this political cold war. The Union was now, in name only, an all Ireland body. Most of the churches were in Northern Ireland and they simply wanted to evangelise localities in the North. It would be very naive to be overly critical of this response by the Northern churches. Remember since 1921 the I.R.A. conducted various terrorist campaigns along the border threatening the Protestant population which culminated in the civil unrest that lasted from 1969–1996. During this period members of Congregational churches were brutally murdered by Republican terrorist organisations. In connection with this the Republic of Ireland was viewed as a place where terrorists could find a safe haven from which to operate.

However, despite the political turmoil and civil unrest this period, 1950 to the present will be remembered as a time when Congregationalism consolidated its position as a small denomination in Northern Ireland. Churches were established at Whitehead (1954), Abbots Cross (1950), Newtownards (1971), Moneymore (1976), Bangor (1987), Erne West outside Enniskillen (1987) and two inter-city churches Spamount and Rugby Avenue relocated to the suburbs of South Belfast. It must be noted that most of these churches were located in predominantly Protestant areas. The other denominations employed the same policy. Only the rural churches in the

105 Rev. Cyril Nicholas, *The Congregationalist,* August 1952.
106 Ibid.

North exposed themselves to reaching out to their Roman Catholic neighbours. As already stated the last sixty years have been a stable time for the Congregational churches in Northern Ireland. Since the mid 1970s only one church has closed—Clifton Park Avenue while others have grown substantially like Abbots Cross, Ballycraigy, Straid, Lisburn, Newtownards and Ballynahinch.

What reason can we give for this consolidation and stabilization? Since the 1940s, the churches under God, gradually called as their ministers men of strong conservative evangelical convictions. Many of these men came from outside of the denomination from the Faith Mission and Belfast City Mission. They brought new vitality to the churches, engaging in strong evangelical preaching, encouraging church members to serve the Lord and distancing their flocks from unbiblical ecumenism. What has been accomplished over this period is reflected by the commitment of churches to the work of home and foreign mission. The Annual Report of the Union in May 2008 lists one hundred and seven missionaries and candidates in training associated with the churches. The total raised for missionary work for 2007 in the returns from twenty four Churches was £412,170.

Today, Congregational Churches in Northern Ireland are generally busy; some well attended while others are small but vibrant. Nevertheless they are finding it increasingly difficult to make inroads into a Society which is growing more materialistic and secular at an alarming rate. Churches are being confronted with a generation who have no knowledge of the Bible or the Gospel. The values and ideals of their faith seem so alien to the generation of today. Congregationalists have fought many battles in the past but it is probably entering its greatest conflict yet. Being such a small denomination its very future could be at stake.

Comment has been made about the disinterest and apathy of Churches towards evangelism and Church planting in the South. In 1986 minds were refocused. The Churches at St Johnston and Castlefin in Donegal were closed and in 1987 the Congregations amalgamated to form a new Church at Raphoe. For the first time in decades the I.E.S. and Congregational Home Mission established a Church in the South of Ireland. This gave a degree of impetus to further consider evangelism in the South. What ensued were years of discussion and numerous papers on how to forward the work but there was no follow through with action on the ground. Congregationalism's desire to move south once again did not save the last remaining Church in Dublin. Kilmainham which had been existence since the Napoleonic Wars stopped functioning as a Church in 2000.

The only positive factor in Kilmainham's demise was the sale of the property for a considerable sum. It was agreed to earmark the money for developing Gospel work in the Republic. As a result a working group was established which made contact with a number of independent fellowships and after three years of discussion, in 2007 Dublin Christian Fellowship was received into the Union. The light of Congregationalism is once again flickering in Ireland's largest city. Tentative discussions continue with other groups. Hopefully this is the beginning of Congregationalism re-establishing a witness in the South of Ireland. There are numerous Independent Churches governing themselves along Congregational lines who desire fellowship with other like-minded believers. Amazingly when the Irish Constitution was drafted and agreed it recognised Congregationalism as one of the Church denominations. Many Independent Fellowships struggle with state recognition; they are viewed with suspicion and labelled as sects. Those who come under the umbrella of the Congregational cause will receive state acknowledgement giving access to schools, prisons, and the right to perform marriages.

European Missionary Fellowship informs us that there are more people in Europe who have never heard the Gospel than there are in Africa. Europe is the world's forgotten mission-field. But of all Europe, surely nowhere has been neglected to the same extent as Ireland. Today the situation remains critical. The traditional authority of the Roman Catholic Church has been dramatically undermined. Irish society is secularizing at frightening pace. The collapse of traditional social and religious structures is leaving a vast spiritual vacuum which is being filled by wealth, materialism, immorality and the deceptive promise of false spirituality.

Today, as never before, the Republic of Ireland needs the Gospel. It needs Christians who will stand, only as Christians, for the Gospel and only the Gospel. It needs Christians who will come to bring the Gospel, and only the Gospel, who will be prepared to abandon the importation of their home cultures if they find that those cultures present any kind of barrier at all to the spread of the Word. It needs Christians who will be prepared to die on a daily basis in order to bring life to the lost. Congregationalists are guilty of failing to keep before them the great spiritual needs of the Republic of Ireland.

Conclusion

Congregationalism has never attained great numerical strength in Ireland. Nevertheless independents have been at work in the country for more than three hundred and sixty years, and it can be claimed that the work has shown some progress, for there is no doubt that the denomination is better organised

and consolidated today than at any period of its history. Individual Congregational Churches through the centuries have impacted local communities which they have sought to evangelise. Eternity will only reveal the full significance of what has been accomplished. However, as one of Ireland's small Church groups it has made only a limited impact on the overall evangelisation of the island. Today this very limited impact can be measured by the fact that many people still ask 'Who are the Congregationalists?' and think they are a sect who believe what they like.

Rodborough Tabernacle, near Stroud, Gloucestershire,
where Cornelius Winter preached his first and last sermons

Christ Church (Baptist/URC), Painswick, Gloucestershire,
built in 1803 it was renamed the Cornelius Winter Memorial Chapel in 1892.

Cornelius Winter 1742–1807

Dr Robert Oliver

'Cornelius Winter! Why Cornelius Winter?', exclaimed a friend, when he heard of this address. 'Surely if he were significant a biography would have been written.' Well, there was a volume of *Memoirs* edited by Winter's student and friend, William Jay, but it is a badly arranged collection of letters and comments on letters that would be a valuable source for further research. Winter deserves attention. He was a man who rose from desperate poverty to great usefulness in Christ's kingdom, a man who made every effort to do good in those spheres where the Lord placed him. His diligence is an example to us all. Much of his work remains unrecorded. He was a man who served when Dissenters were subject to severe discrimination and yet, without playing any part in politics, was used by God in that great advance of Nonconformity that took place between the 1790s and the 1840s, and in the nineteenth century made their cause a power in the land. He was one of the figures in what has been described by Paul Cook as the 'forgotten revival'.[1] Concealed by greater figures such as George Whitefield and William Jay his name should be recovered.

I. Early Life and Conversion

1. The Family

It was 1742 in the reign of George II, the City of London had a couple of years earlier been inflamed by war fever when the 'War of Jenkins's Ear' opened the prospect of rich pickings in the South American trade. This had now widened into the 'War of the Austrian Succession' and Great Britain was dragged into European campaigns. The merchants of London and the British sailors may have been excited by these foreign adventures, but in a home in Gray's Inn Lane in the parish of St Andrew's, Holborn, there were more pressing concerns: John Winter, the breadwinner was dying of consumption and his wife Catherine was expecting their ninth child. John originally a shoemaker from Nottingham had become a porter in nearby Gray's Inn, when the baby was born on 9 October. Sadly John died when Cornelius was nine months old. Catherine struggled to provide for the bereaved family, taking a job as a laundress and caretaker, also in Gray's Inn. In a few years she too fell a victim to consumption, dying when Cornelius was seven years old. By this time only three of the nine children had survived. An older brother was

1 Paul Cook, *Fire from Heaven* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2009).

overseas in the employ of the East India Company and so the sole responsibility for Cornelius fell upon a seventeen year old sister, who struggled to support the two of them, by taking on her mother's job at Gray's Inn. By this time however the family was deeply in debt. The sister therefore sought employment as a live-in domestic servant while Cornelius was sent to the workhouse.

Already Cornelius had been admitted to the St Andrew's Charity School, but after two years he was expelled, probably because his progress had been hindered by frequent absences caused by illness. Heart-broken he begged the governors to give him a further opportunity, but they were obdurate. He recorded that he felt deep distress when he saw his fellow-pupils in church but he was allowed no contact.

2. Changes

Dates are somewhat uncertain, but Cornelius was not long in the workhouse before he was claimed by a cousin who offered him a home. This change did not lead to easier circumstances. The cousin was described as a water-gilder, a worker in gold leaf, with his own business. His wife showed Cornelius little sympathy while her husband turned out to be a drunkard who frequently beat the boy. Cornelius was first employed as an errand boy and then bound as an apprentice. It was a wretched time. At one stage he was strongly tempted to take his own life. After Cornelius left his employ the cousin professed conversion, but even then for years he dreaded meeting him.

3. Conversion

From early childhood Cornelius had loved to attend church, perhaps finding a peace and tranquillity there, away from the misery of his home. At first his parish church was St Andrew's, Holborn and then after moving to his cousin's house, he went to St Luke's, Old Street. He had very little understanding of the gospel, but gained a good knowledge of Scripture. He developed a powerful antipathy to Dissenters and especially to the Methodists. However one Sunday ashamed of his neglected condition and sordid clothes, he turned into a Dissenting meeting house where nobody would recognise him. The preacher was George Whitefield. Although he was at the back, some sixty feet from the preacher, he felt that he was being addressed personally. Fascinated and yet still despising the Methodists, he took opportunities to hear Whitefield in other meeting houses or churches.

As yet there was no saving change; in the company of other apprentices he mocked and mimicked Whitefield. One day a Scottish woman overheard him and with stern rebukes told him to go home and read Romans 8, praying over it until he understood it. A little later, a poor woman, a shopkeeper made him

promise to go with her to hear Whitefield. He promised as long as she would hear some of his favourite Anglican preachers. This was in 1760 when he was eighteen years old. After listening to several men at the parish church, the old lady told him that his preachers could not give her what she wanted.

He went with her to Moorfields Tabernacle. He was deeply impressed by the size of the congregation, their reverence, the deep melody of the singing and Whitefield's earnest preaching. Now the sermons began to take hold of him, so much so that he seized every opportunity to hear the great preacher, who preached at 6.00 am on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays and on Saturday evenings at 6.00 pm, when like other apprentices and workmen he could get in for the sermon late. His former associates noticing the great change began to jeer. This was so on 9 April 1760, when he broke away from a game of cards to go to the Tabernacle where Whitefield preached from 1 Corinthians 15:51–52.

This seems to have been the occasion of his conversion. Life changed completely, all things were made new. He was still bound to his hard task-master who at first seemed to be pleased that he was attending the Tabernacle, but soon expressed his anger and forbade the young man to consult the Bible that he kept in the house. Winter complained that the published sermons were very badly reported and seldom ever corrected by the preacher. He went on: 'Whatever fault criticism may find with his sermons from the press, they were, in the delivery, powerful to command the most devoted attention'.[2] Worship was now his delight and he found men who could meet his hunger for the word of God.

II. The Preacher

1. A new family

Attendance at the Moorfields Tabernacle brought Winter into contact with a group of young men who met regularly for informal prayer and Bible study. Like so many of the early Methodists, Calvinistic and Arminian, they considered themselves to be loyal members of the Church of England and so they regularly attended the Sunday services at St Alban's, Wood Street, where they heard Evangelical Anglican preachers such as William Romaine and Thomas Haweis, but the old prejudices against Dissent were being swept away. He gained the friendship of Edward Hitchin, Independent minister of White Row Meeting, Spitalfields and friend of Augustus Montague Toplady. It was Hitchin who sold him a Bible when he was forbidden the use of his cousin's. A

2 William Jay, *The Works of William Jay,* 5, 'Memoirs of the late Rev. Cornelius Winter (London: Bartlett, 1843), p. 27.

great joy of these years was the conversion of the sister who had cared for him after his mother's death. Brother and sister continued in close fellowship until her death a few years later. On the other hand relations with his cousin remained difficult until he was dismissed for some small misdemeanour.

2. Preaching

An assistant at the Tabernacle who also conducted a small school was the Revd Mr Green. Green conducted a small class for young men who attended the Tabernacle. It was at this meeting that Winter first gave a formal address later in 1760. Green was impressed with his gifts and encouraged him to continue. He then had an opportunity to preach publicly at a meeting in Hertfordshire. It was at about this time that his cousin dismissed him so that when he went to Chatham to take a service and was invited to stay in the area and preach at Gravesend he accepted. Further opportunities came swiftly in Canterbury and Sheerness. He must have continued as an itinerant preacher in the south-east and in London for several years. He wrote:

> I had frequently heard Mr Whitefield lament the want of ministers in America. I knew he had sent some who were equally deficient in point of learning with myself, and I concluded, from the kind reception their ministry had met with, my labours, with the blessing of God, might be acceptable also.[3]

3. George Whitefield and Cornelius Winter.

For Winter the problem was that Whitefield was not easily accessible. His heavy load of preaching and the need for time for correspondence and reading meant that he was reluctant to meet any who might distract him. Winter had however been befriended by Whitefield's friend, the Revd John Berridge, rector of Everton in Bedfordshire, who encouraged him with practical advice on his preaching and also used his assistance in his own extensive preaching circuits. Knowing of Cornelius's desire for the ordained ministry, he warned him that the way would not be easy. Bishops were suspicious of those whom they regarded as 'Methodists'. However he sent him to Whitefield with a letter of commendation. Whitefield received Winter on a Wednesday evening just before preaching himself and told him to be ready to preach at 6.00 am in the Tabernacle the next morning. That evening Whitefield announced, 'that a stranger recommended by Mr Berridge would preach on the morrow morning at six o'clock'.[4] With great trepidation Winter preached as announced.

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3 William Jay, *The Works of William Jay,* 5, 'Memoirs of the late Rev. Cornelius Winter (London: Bartlett, 1843), p. 47.

4 Ibid. p. 49.

Whitefield then told him to collect written testimonials from the various places where he had preached and bring them to him. He obeyed and was received by Whitefield 'with a mixture of kindness and severity'. Clearly Whitefield considered that Cornelius's education needed attention and said that he would arrange for him to learn Latin with Mr Green and that he would employ him as his assistant. Whitefield revised his Latin requirement when he learned that Mr Wesley's preachers managed quite well without it. At some stage later Winter acquired sufficient Latin to be able to correspond with German ministers. Whitefield was an exacting employer requiring punctuality and neatness and also taking pains to correct Winter's handwriting as well as his grammar. Cornelius became impatient, but Whitefield knew that Anglican ordination would facilitate work in the colonies, but he also knew that it would not be easily obtained. Winter fell ill and Whitefield at one stage despaired of his life. The doctors recommended that he leave the unhealthy atmosphere of London for a time and so he was sent to Bristol, where Whitefield had a work. Bristol provided a change of air, but not a rest. For eight months he was preaching three times every Sabbath except when an ordained minister was available and was meeting the Society every day. The tough regimen worked and he was able to return to London after eight months.

On his return he discovered that Whitefield had been able to secure Anglican orders for some men he had sent to America, although was finding it increasingly difficult. His relationships with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) were not good, and the bishops worked in close co-operation with the Society. Richard Terrick, then Bishop of London, responsible for colonial ordinations was no friend to evangelicals. Whitefield was on the point of sending a layman, Mr Wright to reorganize the orphanage at Savannah and to establish a college. He suggested that Winter should accompany Wright who would supervise his further education while Winter would act as chaplain in the college. Winter refused to go without ordination. He was therefore given responsibility for reading prayers at the Tottenham Court Road Chapel and conducting funerals there. Winter consented reluctantly, knowing that if the bishop learned of this, ordination would be even more unlikely. Although Winter chafed at Whitefield's control, he came later to see that the association with him, had been of untold benefit. He acknowledged the outstanding blessing of his preaching and of his conversation.

Eventually Whitefield received a request from the executors of the late rector of Savannah, Bartholomew Zububuhler, who had left money for an ordained minister of the Church of England to come to Georgia to minister to

the African slaves on his plantation. The request was that Whitefield would nominate such a man. Whitefield suggested Winter, thinking that he could begin the work and then return to be ordained. Winter agreed.

3. Savannah

Thus it was that Cornelius Winter set out with George Whitefield on the latter's last Atlantic crossing in September 1769. Whitefield was a good sailor and seemed relaxed on the voyage away from the pressures of usual activities. Cornelius found him an excellent companion. Whitefield took the opportunity to settle him in Savannah, where he seemed to be well-received. The welcome from Whitefield's friends seemed genuine. Within a few months however, it became clear that he would not be welcomed by all the inhabitants. In a letter from Savannah written on the 25 February 1770 he wrote:

> I am inducted into my charge, which has entitled me to the denomination of *Negro Parson.* When expressed, it is meant for a badge of reproach, which to me, since I have been united to him once the reproach of men, is a mark of honour, and in which I rejoice that I am counted worthy. You would hardly think it possible that such an outcry should be made on account of a few black slaves being the object of a poor preacher's attention. Can you guess the reason? I believe I am not mistaken if I inform you that it is through fear that a knowledge of Divine truth should make them more sensible of, and less willing to be subject to, that bondage, from which death, sooner or later will give them a final discharge. What a flagrant proof this that they are altogether without understanding, and know not the Scriptures, nor the power of God.[5]

At first Samuel Fink, the Rector of Savannah appeared to be a friend. It emerged later that he had never approved of the appointment of Winter and had written to protest against it to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and to the Bishop of London.

Whitefield left Savannah on what proved to be his last preaching tour to the North in April 1770. In the Fall of that year news reached Savannah that he had died at the end of September. The colony was plunged into grief. By this time the executors of Zububuhler's will considered that it was time for Winter to be ordained. They wrote therefore to the Bishop of London asking for his ordination and supplyed a warm testimonial which was endorsed by the Governor of Georgia. Equipped with these documents and also carrying Whitefield's will with him, Cornelius Winter set sail for England in November 1770 for what proved to be a hazardous crossing.

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5 Ibid. pp. 393, 394.

III. The Dissenter

1. London

Winter landed at Dover on 30 January 1771 and immediately made his way to London, where he was warmly welcomed by Robert Keen, a friend of Whitefield and a merchant in London. He was told that he would be welcome to stay at the Tabernacle House while he sorted out his affairs. He wasted no time in visiting the Bishop of London, to whom he handed the letters from his friends in Georgia. It was a painful experience. When he explained that he had gone as a catechist, the Bishop said 'But you preached'. Winter somewhat ingenuously replied that he had explained the Scriptures. 'It was illegal, said the Bishop, 'You had no right to do so'. He was questioned about his education, his reading and then about his association with George Whitefield of whom the Bishop clearly disapproved. He was told that he must apply for ordination through the SPG. When he approached the Society they said that they could do nothing as he had gone to America without their approbation. A further approach to the Bishop proved useless. He would only ordain those men recommended by the Society and he insisted that Whitefield's preachers acted illegally. He concluded: 'To be plain with you, Mr Winter, we had information from America of your going over long before you embarked from England, and had warning, even though you should return home, not to ordain you'.[6]

When this news reached the executors in Georgia, they decided that they must seek a man already ordained. Winter applied to the Bishop of St Asaph, but was again turned down. He consulted John Berridge, who urged patience, pointing out that God's ways are not always our ways.

2. Bristol

Robert Keen suggested that he could do more good by leaving London and going again to Bristol. There he could preach in Whitefield's Tabernacle, but of course would be making himself even more obnoxious to the bishops. Strangely when Whitefield made arrangements in his will for the continuance of his work, there was no mention of the Bristol Tabernacle and as a result the men who managed his affairs in London would accept no responsibility for it.

In April 1771 Winter began to preach there. While there he met Rowland Hill for the first time and introduced him to the pulpit of the Bristol Tabernacle. This was the start of what was to be a lifelong friendship. Hill had recently been disowned by his family and it was Winter who arranged a

6 Ibid. p. 101.

collection to buy him a horse. Winter was also befriended by Joseph Shipman, one of the six students who a few years earlier had been expelled from the university of Oxford for Methodism. He did not remain long at the Tabernacle as, having discovered financial irregularities in the administration, he had to leave.

Once again he became an itinerant preacher in the Calvinistic wing of Methodism. He established a base in Wiltshire, where he took lodgings in the village of Christian Malford near Chippenham. Although his ministry was mainly in the Cotswolds he went as far as Pembrokeshire in South Wales and as far north as Garstang in Lancashire. Still convinced that he could be more useful as an ordained Anglican among the Methodists, he discussed his concern with his old friend, Edward Hitchin, who explained that he too would have loved to have been able to serve the Church of England, but said, 'I love a clergyman to my heart, and have had a great desire to go into the church; but (stretching out his hand and laying hold of a flat volume which contained the Canons and Articles), these always prevent me'.[7] Winter for the first time began to study the principles of dissent from the Church of England and was persuaded of their validity. The congregations that he served seldom received the Lord's Supper and Rowland Hill urged him to make the break and receive ordination as a Dissenter. He concluded that was his duty resolving, 'that if once I received ordination among the Dissenters of any description, never to invalidate it by submitting to any other'.[8] In a letter he later explained his position:

> I am a Dissenter upon principle, though but a young one, having given the preference to the establishment till within these two years. As I am honest to my convictions, so I am moderate in my conduct, presuming that neither system is so complete but they both would admit of an amendment; and as an evangelical minister in either community would wish to do good, he can no further succeed than as he is disposed to throw aside such rigour and austerity as are nowhere countenanced in Scripture, nor were encouraged by the apostle of the Gentiles or the Master of that apostle.[9]

In October 1777, Cornelius Winter was ordained as pastor of the three small churches of Castle Combe, Chippenham and Christian Malford. It is somewhat surprising to find him moving to Marlborough in February 1778. Various factors seem to have led to this swift change. Although he assumed pastoral responsibilities over three small churches, they were not able to

7 Ibid. p. 117.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid. p. 408.

support him financially and he was compelled to itinerate. There were some who disapproved of his ordination as a Dissenting minister. It is possible that they were members of the societies who did not want to break with the Church of England and were willing to wait for the occasional ministry of ordained ministers of the Established Church rather than be pastored by a Dissenter. Whatever the precise reason it was on the advice of Mr Sloper the Independent minister in Devizes that Winter moved to Marlborough only four months after his ordination. Rowland Hill disapproved of the move but nevertheless preached at his settlement in Marlborough and Winter remained on friendly terms with the people at Christian Malford and always referred to his happiness in that village.

IV. Pastor and Teacher

1. Marlborough

Marlborough is a pleasant market town in north-east Wiltshire. It claims the widest high street in England and many of the surviving buildings would have been familiar to Cornelius Winter and his friends. The famous public school came into existence long after Winter left the area in which he served for ten years from 1778. The origins of the Independent Church are obscure, but its meeting house at this time was the private property of a Mr Hancock who was an active supporter of the work and responsible for one third of Winter's stipend. This close family connection was later to lead to difficulties. Of his own situation Winter wrote:

> Marlborough is a high church neighbourhood, and full of prejudice against Methodism, for under that appellation I was considered, and many of its inhabitants are men of letters: therefore, that I might not disgrace my profession through ignorance, any more than by making an ostentatious parade of learning, I entered sparingly into company, conversed with caution, and improved my time to the best advantage. I had no notion of studying merely for the sake of making myself an acceptable companion; indeed to go on with my design, it was necessary that I should preclude company. I still kept the important object of an active ministry in view, which engrossed all my time.[10]

William Jay commented on his achievements.

> With regard to his learning it has already appeared that he was destitute of a classical education, and began his ministry under very great disadvantages. Though this could not be regarded as his fault, he felt it as his affliction; and never resembled those who depreciate what they do not possess, and are not

10 Ibid. p. 126.

> willing to acquire. Never did a man more value erudition, in all its various branches, and for all its legitimate purposes; never did a man strive more patiently and laboriously to gain literature. And his acquisitions, considered in connexion with his circumstances were eminent. He had more than a competent knowledge of the original languages, and read the Scriptures in them. He well understood the Latin tongue, and made proficiency in the French. His acquaintance with general science, though not profound was extensive. He knew no luxury so great as a book: his reading was constant and diversified.[11]

Preaching regularly, he saw his congregations grow. Within two years he married Miriam Brown, who had an income from a small farm. From that time his financial situation became easier, although according to Jay he always lived frugally.

Having struggled to educate himself, Winter always encouraged others to improve their education. While still itinerating he vowed that if he had the opportunity to help a poor boy he would do so. He began with the son of one of the deacons at Marlborough. With this boy he laid the foundations of learning and lived to see him become a successful businessman. After his marriage a lady in Bristol asked him to take her son Thomas Higgs as a boarder. He accepted him, eventually passing him on to the evangelical rector of Wingfield who prepared him for the university. He went to Oxford where he proved to be a brilliant student, but sadly died while still an undergraduate.

Initially Winter's pupils were boys who were boarded one or two at a time in his home. This changed in 1782 when preaching at Frampton in Gloucestershire, he met a young man by the name of Surman. Deeply impressed he asked him back to his lodgings where he asked him to read the Scriptures to him. Immediately Winter was aware of the limitations of the young man's education. He asked him if he was aware of a call to the Christian ministry. Surman replied that he was, but given his circumstances it was impossible. Eventually Winter arranged for him to come to Marlborough, where he set about attending to the deficiencies in his education and took him out on pastoral visits and to accompany him on visits to preaching stations in the villages. Eventually Surman became Winter's assistant until he was called to a pastorate in Chesham, Buckinghamshire.

Surman was the first of some dozen men who came to the manse at Marlborough for their training. The best known of these was William Jay who was to serve for over sixty years as pastor of Argyle Chapel, Bath. William Jay was born at Tisbury in south Wiltshire, where his father was a stonemason and

11 Ibid. pp. 184, 5.

it was to this trade that young William or Billy as he was known was apprenticed. The family attended a Presbyterian church which had lapsed into Unitarianism. He received a basic village school education and then began to work with his father on Fonthill Abbey, a mansion built as a romantic folly by William Beckford. A house was licensed for worship in Tisbury, by a Thomas Turner of Trowbridge who had been born in the village and here Jay as a teenager heard the gospel and was converted. Amongst the men who preached was Cornelius Winter who rode the forty miles down from Marlborough. He saw Jay in the congregation and asked who he was. On his next visit he asked to see Billy Jay in the parlour after preaching. The result was that Jay was invited to come to the Marlborough academy. He was just over sixteen when he started. He found the work hard and felt that his progress was slow. He commented that

> The literary acquisitions of the students were not a little impeded by what the tutor deemed justifiable. The state of the country was very different from what it now is, as to an evangelical ministry. The real labourers were few. The spiritual condition of many of the villages was deplorable, and the people were perishing for want of knowledge. No one cared for their souls. So it was with the vicinages all around Marlborough; and their spiritual wants, if not their wishes, cried aloud, 'Come over and help us'. Mr Winter, therefore obtained and licensed various private houses to preach in, and not only went as often as he was able himself, but also sent his young men to instruct these poor creatures, and show unto them the way of life.[12]

Although there were clearly deficiencies in Winter's Academy, it also had its advantages, as Jay explains:

> One of the advantages of a smaller academy like that at Marlborough was its assuming a kind of domestic character and associating us more with the tutor himself. A freer and more intimate access to the tutor is sadly wanting in some. Yea, I fear, in all our public institutions. It is not enough for the student to hear his tutor regularly and formally lecture. There are things of great importance, especially to his experience and conduct, and character, some of which are too delicate, and many of which are too minute to be here brought forward. These can only be supplied properly by personal intercourse and converse. In this respect…I had a peculiar privilege; for, as I was so young, Mr Winter felt a more parental relation toward me; and besides the freedom we all had in the family, he never walked out in the morning or evening but I was always by his side. I was frequently with him when he took an excursion for a

12 George Redford and John Angell James, eds, *The Autobiography of William Jay* (1854; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), pp. 39, 40.

> few days from home. With what gratitude do I look back to these hours, and thank God for my distinguished intimacy with such a celestial spirit.[13]

Jay left the Marlborough Academy in the summer of 1788 to take up a work in Christian Malford. By this time there were signs of a change at Marlborough. Winter had been living at a demanding pace and it is not surprising that he came to the conclusion that he must give up his school. There were indications that the church would not be able to provide for him. There had been considerable additions to the membership but generally these had been from the poorest classes. A loyal supporter who had given generously to the work failed in business during a general economic crisis. There were also problems with the Hancock family. The meeting house was the property of that family, the senior member of which had been a loyal supporter of the work, but by now he was failing in health. It was evident that his sons did not share his convictions. After one sermon in which Winter warned the young people in particular against spiritual carelessness, Hancock's eldest son took offence claiming that Winter had been preaching against him and angrily declared that he would never come to hear him again. It was at this point that he received an approach from the Independent Church at Painswick, Gloucestershire. He wrote to Hancock about this but while Winter was away on a preaching tour, Hancock died. On his return he immediately tried to visit the bereaved family, but the offended elder son would not allow him into the house or allow him any part in the burial service, although Winter preached a memorial sermon at the meeting house. It was this combination of events that persuaded him that he should accept the call to Painswick in the summer of 1788.

2. Painswick

Today Painswick is described as the 'Queen of the Cotswolds'. Beautifully situated to the north of the industrial town of Stroud it has a wealth of old buildings and not surprisingly is a tourist attraction. Cornelius and Miriam settled about half a mile to the north of the town in a rented farm house above the western slope of the Cotswolds. The new home offered a quiet retreat to which many of Winter's old students came to enjoy fellowship and to browse among his books. The church to which he was called continues as the Cornelius Winter Memorial United Reformed Church. He settled to a regular round of preaching and pastoral visiting, still itinerating among local churches although seemingly not so active in church planting as in Wiltshire. He was especially concerned for the children and young people of his charge and

13 Ibid. pp. 47, 48.

established what he described as a 'catechetical lecture', based on the Shorter Catechism, supplementing the questions of the form with subsidiary ones of his own, 'designed to discover if there were any principles of grace'.

A Mr Richardson from the congregation who had been an artisan was perceived to have gifts of ministry and was called to study with Winter and for a time acted as assistant until he was called to the pastorate of Frampton, Gloucestershire.

Reflecting on his work in Painswick after eleven years he wrote:

> Since I have been here I have met with little in my pastoral connexion to disturb or afflict me. Family differences, personal prejudice, and some instances of immorality have proved a source of affliction; but these and a few other proofs of human imperfections excepted, I am surrounded with a poor, simple, pious affectionate people, who contribute willingly, though slenderly, according to their ability, to my subsistence; and for whom I will very gladly spend and be spent.[14]

Once again as a Dissenter Winter was conscious of the prejudice that was still strong against Dissent. Perhaps as a former Anglican he felt this more acutely than those who had been brought up in Dissenting families. It was not until 1829 that the legislation that made Dissenters second class citizens was repealed. Two of his students went on to prepare for the Anglican ministry at Oxford and Cambridge, universities still closed to Dissenters. In spite of disadvantages his preaching continued to draw considerable numbers. William Jay said that he was not a great preacher, 'venerable in the pulpit, not striking. He had no action, his voice was not very clear or powerful. His utterance was rather slow and inanimated.'[15] Sometimes he was obscure and perplexing, but he was a godly pastor who loved to teach. He was particularly gifted in prayer. Jay continues:

> I have heard many pray, but I never heard one that prayed entirely like him. I never knew him at a loss for a word, or using a word improperly … I am persuaded however that much of his devotional fluency arose from the state of his heart; for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh … The Sabbath morning he was more than ordinarly devotional, and commonly indulged himself at length, especially at intercession: at other times he was rather short.[16]

He was noted for his catholicity of spirit and in this respect resembled George Whitefield. His convictions were firm, he was a convinced Dissenter, a

14 *Winter Memoirs,* p. 152.
15 Ibid. p. 206.
16 Ibid. pp. 213–4.

Calvinistic Independent, a pædobaptist. He had a good relationship with John Wesley and stayed on occasion with John Fletcher of Madeley. Nearer home he had a close friendship with Benjamin Francis, the Baptist pastor of Shortwood. When the Arminian Methodists built a chapel in Painswick, some of his congregation considered it a rival enterprise, but Winter would entertain no bad feelings and prayed for the blessing of God to rest upon that work on the first Sunday that it was opened.

In the year 1800 Cornelius fell and broke his leg as he was returning home from a pastoral visit. He had to be taken home in a cart, nothing else was available at the time. His leg had to be set, a painful process. It was some time before he could walk easily again. He returned to the pulpit but had to sit to preach. Numbers were still increasing so much that it was necessary to enlarge the building. The Painswick congregation could not raise sufficient funds for this project and so Winter had to resort to a preaching tour in which he begged for funds to pay for the work. In spite of his recent injuries he set off. He was by now so well known and widely loved that the gifts exceeded all expectations and the extended building was opened in 1804. He commented that he did not think that he would preach in the building for long. By now he had received a considerable legacy himself and so he handed back a part of his stipend to the church to pay for an assistant. For the last time he received two ministerial students, both of whom were later called to serve as pastors.

On 13 December 1807 he preached at Rodborough Tabernacle, a work established by George Whitefield and the location of Winter's first sermon in Gloucestershire many years before. This was his last sermon. He suffered what seems to have been a stroke the next day and was taken home to Painswick a sick man. He died early in the new year 1808 and was buried at Painswick on 19 January.

Let Cornelius Winter have the last word with a few of his aphorisms, recorded by William Jay:

> Though the Lord's way is hid from us, our way is not hid from him.
>
> Let us rest in Jesus now, and we shall rest with him soon.
>
> It is a great matter to be able to distinguish between waiting and loitering.
>
> Every place is alike to him who goes nowhere without God.
>
> Seclusion from the world prepares us for communion with God; and communion with God prepares us for intercourse with the world.[17]

17 Ibid. pp. 266–7.

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