

BHS Newsletter - NOVEMBER 2002

Reflections - BHS Summer School, 11-14 July 2002

Was this really Manchester? Glorious sunshine greeted the twenty-four writers and readers of Baptist history who met at Luther King House for a weekend of cooperative learning and a useful exchange of interests and ideas.

Several speakers cast light on people who have been 'hidden from history'. Sebastien Fath revealed the Baptist Continental Society of 1831-36, an important thread in the fragile web of 19th-century French Baptist development. Its French workers are known from their reports, though the British supporters remain victims of anonymity. David Killingray presented evidence for Black involvement in British Baptist life, long before the arrival of the 'Empire Windrush'. Karen Smith showed how, defying prejudice and convention, women contributed to the early work of the Baptist World Alliance. The image of Nellie Burr, an Afro-American, perched on a cart at Hyde Park Corner and addressing the crowd in 1905, will long be remembered. Was it J.H. Shakespeare who engineered the opportunity for her? In all these cases one wants to know more, and the speakers will welcome information for their ongoing research.

The rebuilding of St Mary's Baptist Church, Norwich, circa 1951, by Stanley J. Wearing, provided Clyde Binfield with a hub supporting brightly-lit spokes - architecture, local history, denomination, family and professional connections. Spinning this wheel of history illuminated not only St Mary's but also the cultural pressures affecting much church-building. Peter Shepherd expertly unravelled the complex factors in Manchester Baptist College's fight for life - closed communion principles (though Spurgeon was welcomed as a visiting speaker), Lancashire loyalty which scuppered merger plans, and the balance to be struck between students' aptitudes and practical needs and the desire for an educated ministry. An economic historian's view of declining lay leadership in the Baptist Union during the 20th century was given by David Jeremy, backed up by lists and statistics and by comparison with, for example, the Methodists. This led to a lively discussion about the evidence, the potential contribution of lay people and the constraints of working life today.

Four so-called 'short' papers opened up big subjects. Malcolm Thorp kept us riveted and appalled as he chronicled the violent attacks on Dissenters in Wickham Market, Suffolk, in 1810-11. Such hostility is widely documented but this case had unusual features and led to an early litigation success for the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty. The text for Derek Murray's paper was 'Not many noble', perhaps with an ironic question mark. Starting with an early 19th century list of residents of George Square, Edinburgh, he traced the upper-class (and indeed aristocratic) links of the first generation of Scottish Baptists, a rich array of unconformable individuals. Thornton Elwyn pleaded for the writing of Association histories, especially for the period 1950-2000. The story needs to be told now, while memories are fresh and sources more easily traced (oral historians, please keep up your good work!) Jim Grenfell widened our horizons with his account of the Angolan Baptist mission, beset by witchcraft, Kimbanguism, Portuguese oppression and civil war. His paper combined living witness and historical analysis, a most valuable insight.

BHS summer schools are not for nostalgic souls who see themselves as key-holders of tradition. The mood always seems to be one of critical enquiry - 'How did we get here?' And then, in hopeful reflection, 'Where are we going?' In this context a very important contribution was the resounding challenge of Sean Winter's 'Covenant, fellowship, friendship: towards a Baptist social ethic'.

ROSEMARY TAYLOR

REPORT OF THE UNITED URC/BHS ANNUAL MEETING

Held on Saturday 21 September 2002 at Dr Williams's Library

About 50 people gathered on this occasion when the URC and Baptist Historical Societies invited Baptist historian, Revd Basil Amey, to give a lecture on 'The Free Church Federal: a retrospective view'. It was disappointing that only six BHS members were present.

Basil Amey, who is writing a history of the Free Church Council in the last century, opened by telling how the evangelical Free Churches first came together at the close of the 19th century, when there was still a strong tide flowing against the Romanising tendencies abroad in the Church of England. Leaders like C Sylvester Horne and others, who believed dis-establishment was still vital, forcefully expressed this, at a time when some leading Anglicans could still refer to the Free Churches as 'an organisation', not churches.

When the Free Churches first came together the concerns were fellowship, mission, ministry. Church unity was not on the agenda. What mattered was friendship. In international matters, arbitration was the key, rather than the sword. Liberal politics largely dominated Free Church thinking. In this climate, the goal of J H Shakespeare increasingly became Federalism, whereby there would be just one Free Church in every village.

But by the time the Free Church Federal Council was formed in 1940 the impetus had been lost. It did not have a clean slate with which to start, it had the 'rump' of the 1892 agenda. Politically the Free Churches influence had already waned, and as Amey analysed the key issues, in R A Butler's 1944 Education Bill and the creation of Bevan's health service, the almost total failure of the Free Churches to affect policy was revealed.

The rising pursuit of church unity among the various denominations, progressively side-lined the work of the FCFC, as its constituent denominations drew closer together to each other [Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Disciples of Christ], and Methodists moved unsuccessfully towards the Anglicans. The revival of a broader concept of 'evangelicalism' across the denominations, undermined the FCFC. The final blow was when, in the interests of ecumenism, the British Council of Churches was replaced with Churches Together in England, and the Free Churches became 'a group' within the new ecumenical body. The full text of Basil Amey's paper will appear in the United Reformed Church History journal in due course and will re-pay careful consideration by Baptists.

Time allowed for only a very brief response about 'The New Partnership', from Revd Geoffrey Roper, the present Secretary of the Free Churches Group of Churches Together in England.

ROGER HAYDEN

View from the Inside

In the earlier days of the Congo Church missionaries were given African names. Perhaps this was because nationals found it hard to pronounce English words (they added vowels between two adjacent consonants and also included a final vowel) so that my own name, for example, if they ever used it, was Sitanithorpi. However, they eventually gave my wife and myself the name Eziba.

Some time ago I learned that I had another name. Wangoy Ikamba-Mackenzie is the son of one of our Bolobo pastors. He studied at our boarding school there and later married Georgina Mackenzie, one of the BMS nurses. Later they returned to this country and now live near Torquay. Much to his credit, Wangoy has not forgotten his native land and has given much time to producing a hymnbook in his own Kisengele tongue and is currently engaged in translating parts of the New Testament into that language.

I sent him a copy of a little booklet called 'Home and Away' which described some of our life in pre- and early Independence Congo days. When he rang me up to acknowledge its receipt, we talked for a while and I suggested that he could usefully produce similar material about his early life. A short while afterwards he rang me again.

"Did you know that we gave you another name?" he asked. "We schoolboys used to call you 'Mongonzoto'. It means, 'You don't answer him back!' At that time I was Directeur of the Boys Primary School, whose senior pupils, even after a recent age-cull, were often 16 or 17 years old. They used to do odd jobs on the Mission Station such as cutting the pass-pallum grass with their mimpatis. Naturally, they often looked for a break but if I hove into sight, the word would go round, "Mongonzoto amoya" (M is coming), whereupon they would resume work. I was blissfully unaware of this and used to think how conscientious they all were!

This led me to think that there must be many aspects of church history which remained unknown to us. These are the stories as seen by the 'natives'. It is said that history is written by the victors and there is much truth in this. Likewise, much church and mission history is written by the people who were in the driving seat, that is the missionaries. We do not hear much about the story from the point of view of those who received it and if we do not try to record it, we may soon lose it for ever.

I speak from experience. Once, at Bolobo, someone turned up with an exercise book in which was written an account of the way in which the Ba-Sengele people in our area first received the Gospel. Bolobo stood on the river Congo and the Sengele tribe was further inland from us. Thus, pioneer missionaries had only ventured there in the early part of the 20th century. At that time then (late 50's) they were still living in early church days. I looked at the exercise book but could not make any sense out of it. The writer, although well-intentioned, had little literary or historical ability. Had I used my common sense, I could have asked one of our school teachers from that tribe to help me produce an orderly account, much as Luke had done in his Gospel. However, I missed my opportunity and the book has presumably been lost.

The fascinating stories of missions always came from the missionaries themselves. Only they could read and write if they were working among primitive peoples such as in Congo. Naturally, then, they told the tale as they saw it. As far as I know, nobody ever bothered to ask the nationals. They could have told a similar story but from a different point of view. They could have told us how they felt on hearing that the Creator of the world loved them and had sent His Son to die for their sins. They could have said how they faced the problems of readjusting their lives in the light of the Gospel. How, for example, had their family and social life altered? In what ways had they resisted the challenges of witchcraft and how had their new faith altered their views of inter-tribal animosity? How had they viewed the missionaries? Often the colonial situation endowed the white person with an authority which he may not have sought, but which he would hardly discard, and the average Congolese villager might have found it difficult to open his heart to the 'moteyi', as they called us, and speak as honestly as he would have done to a fellow tribesman. No doubt they spoke freely to one another in their homes, but their comments have been lost.

BMS World Mission workers in more advanced parts of the world should find it easier to enlist younger Christians in this work. The era of jungle-hacking pioneers has passed and booksellers tell us that missionary books do not sell well now. Perhaps we need to look at the story from the inside.

FRED STAINTHORPE