

CHURCH AND CIRCUIT LIFE

The circuit has experienced five events which changed its form or outlook in its century; two world wars, Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodist unity in 1932/3, the lost unity with the Anglican church in the late 60's, and the restructuring of Methodist organisation in the 70's. Following Connexional and District changes in 1996 and onwards it may well be about to end the century with another but perhaps more gradual alteration in procedures.

Eventually all these factors changed the way of life in the churches, but to the individual the change may be slow and hardly noticeable. The first world war left gaps in congregations as well as altering the church-going habits of the nation as a whole. The decline in church membership nationally did not affect the circuit because the years from 1900 on were years of rapid housing growth locally, and the new church buildings of the first decade are evidence of this.

The Uniting Conference of the Methodists in 1932 brought Gravelly Hill (United) and High St, Erdington (Primitive) into the circuit. The union was marked by a great celebration at Stockland Green on October 3rd 1932, organised by a new committee with representation as follows;

- Wesleyan 4 Ministers and 4 laymen
- Primitive 1 Minister and 1 layman
- United 1 Minister and 1 layman

reflecting fairly the strengths of the churches involved.

The first District Synod of the new Methodist Church was held at Sutton Coldfield with an attendance of 500 and lunch in the Town Hall presided over by the Mayor as host.

The effects of the second world war on property have been outlined elsewhere. At no time previously had such a large proportion of the population been so involved in a national effort. Most people, young and old, if not called up into the Forces, took up or were drafted into some kind of war service in addition to demanding jobs with long hours. Church activities declined as a result, but while weekday meetings might be cancelled or just held in summer months (no-one liked going home in the blacked out streets for the first year or two of the war- or if an air raid warning came at 6p.m.) nevertheless the Sunday service continued, if only on a Sunday afternoon. It was only in 1945 that some normality returned, but post war rationing of food, clothes, fuel and building materials was slow to disappear. There was a brief period of stability in the 1950's before other events affected church life.

The Anglican/Methodist talks of the late 60's and early 70's with their hope of eventual union led churches in the circuit to a greater degree of ecumenical collaboration than had ever been imagined. Observers from leaders

meetings attended parish council meetings for several months and vice versa. Ministers were leading their congregations towards unity, even if some were reluctant. Ministers fraternals (the meeting of ministers from all local denominations) became imbued with a new meaning and exchanges of pulpits became more frequent. Joint services, during Holy Week for instance, and on other ecclesiastical occasions were willingly arranged. The withdrawal by the Anglicans naturally halted some of these experiments, but this did not altogether stop great strides being made ecumenically. The joint ventures at Castle Vale and St. Chads, it was hoped, would benefit from this new spirit of co-operation. The superintendent at the time became used to being addressed by his Anglican counterpart as "Superintendent Wade", which, he said, made him feel like a policeman.

At several places in the circuit ecumenism resulted in bonds being formed between local churches which today are increasing in strength and the church year is now marked by joint events such as Good Friday Witness meetings in shopping centres and joint services during Holy Week. In Sutton Coldfield a "Drop-in Centre" was a feature of the Parade for some time, until re-development of the area removed the building used. Other ventures are organised by a body now known as Churches Together In Sutton Coldfield, which incorporates lay representatives from the churches concerned. This pattern is repeated, notably at Boldmere and Streetly.

Restructuring in the 1970's was the major change in church life during the century, The separate bodies of trustees and leaders which had been the source of petty jealousies and some friction for decades were eliminated, to be replaced by one body- the Church Council. Previously the legally appointed trustees had remained for life if they so wished, although the list of trustees was reviewed and reformed from time to time over the years. They were responsible for property and finance- and were capable of pronouncing on almost any other matter. They appointed the organist; the choir was kept under a watchful eye, and the dozen men (sometimes up to twenty with very few women) constituted in some cases an elite regarded with awe by some members.

The leaders meeting, on the other hand, was defined by one minister in the 30's as "a church court responsible for the spiritual life, worship and discipline of the society." The society stewards would bring to the meeting (consisting of secretaries of committees, youth leaders, choir representatives and a number of ordinary members) everyday matters concerning the life of the church, and at the quarterly meeting of the body regular attention would be paid to the pastoral care of the congregation. Those who had died during the quarter would be remembered by those present in silence and appropriate letters would be

sent. (This aspect of the meeting was overlooked in the first agendas of the new church councils and at some churches this is now recognised by the holding of a memorial service prior to the annual church meeting.) The leaders meeting was a forum at which the ordinary member could speak and be heard, and it was not so unwieldy that people sat for three years without speaking, a danger with the larger church councils.

But between the two bodies was a gap neatly shown in this excerpt from the minutes of a leaders meeting in 1935. An offer had been received by the trustees for the purchase of a site owned by the church. They formally proposed a joint meeting with the leaders. The minutes read; " the leaders wish to record their appreciation to the trustees in affording them the opportunity to share a discussion on the matter". The subsequent meeting was little more than a communication of the facts by the trustees.

The new church councils replacing these bodies were appointed managing trustees of the property, and responsible to the councils were new committees for finance, property, neighbourhood, family, pastoral, social responsibility and worship. These were chaired by laymen or women, thus relieving the minister of some administrative duties, although most ministers still attended meetings. Not all churches had all the committees, depending on the size of the membership, and some committees were found to be more successful than others, but churches soon found those that were necessary to their work.

At circuit level committees were formed to bring together representatives of the church committees, a circuit minister being appointed together with a lay secretary to lead the groups and to report to the circuit meeting. Some thrived and performed a useful function, but others only came to life when a determined minister took charge. These committees and their church counterparts had the potential to become useful channels of communication between Conference, district, circuit and church members. Sometimes they worked and changes in policy or the frequent reports of Conference appointed working parties filtered through; but often they did not, sometimes not even reaching church councils. Stimulating the interest of the ordinary member in church affairs other than worship remains an area still to be fully explored. It may be thought that the average member (not on some committee) will not be interested; but he or she might be, given the number of fellowship groups and class meetings which are always looking for subjects for discussion.

The quarterly meeting in this circuit was 75 years old when it was replaced by the circuit meeting with its two or at the most three meetings each year. The quarterly tradition of tea at 6p.m. prior to the meeting was a time of fellowship now lost, and hardly replaced by the hurried cup of tea after the circuit meeting, often delayed

SUTTON PARK CIRCUIT YOUTH COUNCIL

Secretaries Rev. E. W. BLENNERHASSETT and Miss. M. NICHOLAS
Rally Organiser - - - - - Mr. EDGAR J. HACKER

NINTH

Annual



Circuit

GUILD AND YOUTH

RALLY

**at STATION ROAD METHODIST CHURCH
ERDINGTON**

ON

WED., 25th NOVEMBER 1953 at 7-30 p.m.

Speaker : Rev. FRED W. MILSON, B.D.

(Longton Central Hall)

Soloist : Miss. ANN PARDOE [Soprano]

Chairman : J. E. COLLINS, Esq.

Supported by Council Officers

ROLL CALL AND CHORAL RESPONSE

[Conducted by Mr. E. J. HACKER]

Organist : Mr. DONALD SPARROW F.R.C.O.

Collection for Circuit Youth Funds

by the pressure of business to be dealt with. The diminution of circuit life is often put down to the pace of working life in the 80's and 90's, but the loss of personal contacts between members of the circuit churches is to be deplored. Interest in circuit affairs is now confined to a small number in each church, and there seems to be no prospect of improving the situation. Even attendance at the circuit meeting is falling with only about two thirds of those entitled to attend actually doing so.

A circuit general purposes committee meets at intervals (it includes the invitations committee for new ministers) to bring recommendations to the circuit meeting on courses of action should the requirement exist.

The majority of the members of the circuit meeting are male, notwithstanding the preponderance of women in church membership as a whole. A survey at one church in 1983 found that 62% of members were women, a percentage slowly increasing as the average age of members increases, as women outnumber men to a greater extent in the higher age ranges. The number of women in church meetings open to both sexes is increasing however, perhaps as a result of changes in womens church organisations.

During the 1920's the womens' Bright Hour was a popular weekday meeting. At least one such meeting continues in the circuit, although in the evening rather than in the afternoon. Women also met at sewing parties regularly to make items for sale at the Fairs and Sales of Work which were main fund raising events in the first half of the century,. These were also a form of fellowship and were the forerunners of the Womens' Fellowship meetings held in almost all the circuit churches today having been started in the 1940's. There were sewing circles right up to the 60's, but as the demand for their sort of handicraft declined, so did these groups. During the post-war years daytime meetings of "young wives" started and continue under different names without the emphasis on the married status; many have been transferred to evenings to accommodate women at work and at some, men are admitted. The Wesley Guild, a monthly meeting for all, tied to a national body, was also common in mid century but only one church now has one. There have been experiments with monthly meetings of a similar nature called by other names, e.g. "The Church at Home" but these seem to have lasted only a few years. There are meetings for men at some churches, those for retired men being quite successful.

In 1858 a ladies committee of the Methodist Church was founded " for the amelioration of the condition of women in heathen countries and for education". By 1900 this had become the Women's Auxiliary, with similar organisations existing in the other free churches. By 1932 the Auxiliary was part of the Methodist Missionary Society and became known as Womens Work, The basis of Womens Work at the time was the need to bring help to areas worldwide "where men

SUTTON PARK CIRCUIT.

J.M.A. RALLY

Schoolroom, Station Road Methodist Church,
ERDINGTON.

Saturday, 6th February, 1954, at 3 p.m.

Interesting Speaker:

Mrs. G. E. LONG

(Late of Hyderabad now of Handsworth College)

President: **Mr. D. A. BATES**

(Late Kingsbury)

Medals and Certificates presented by

MISS MABEL SAMUELS

(Barnall)

OFFERING FOR MISSIONARY FUNDS

GIRLS & BOYS—This is your Rally
—Come and Make a Crowd!!

were not acceptable and only women could help women". This was achieved by sending female medical and educational personnel abroad, partly funded by women in the circuits, for example through the annual Easter offering. The title "Womens Work" gradually came to be seen as inadequate and in 1988 a new organisation was formed called Network. Whether this change was any improvement gave rise to some misgivings, as Network did not specifically exclude men, but it reflected the increasingly prominent part that women were playing in almost every aspect of national life. Network has its representatives in every church and the circuit meeting hears its reports as part of the agenda. The Connexional Secretary has said "Network is about working towards the true community of men and women in the church.....Network is primarily for women but not exclusively so". Few men, however, take any active part. In the circuit Network does provide opportunities for women of all ages to meet and is gaining strength.

One of the most successful innovations of the last fifty years has been the development of Toddlers clubs now held in the majority of circuit churches. These bring dozens of mothers (and a few fathers) with their toddlers to church premises every week. At some a simple service is occasionally held, and some of the children go on to junior church on Sunday, sometimes bringing the family into the church. In the 80's Mothers and Babies clubs followed, allowing mothers to meet while their babies are watched by helpers, eventually, it is hoped, to join the toddlers in their boisterous play hour. At the other end of the age range, luncheon clubs providing weekly or monthly lunches mainly for the elderly living alone have flourished in the last twenty years and are very popular. But with toddlers and the elderly the hard work by groups of women in the churches is the key to success.

And finally, the Class Meeting. These were the basis of the early Methodist Church, originally a group of twelve members meeting weekly at the home of the class leader, a lay person. At the turn of the century these meetings, for Bible or other religious study, continued in the form in which John Wesley had first set them up and at which there was a regular collection or membership subscription. A circuit directory of 1937 lists classes at all the circuit churches, from 16 at Sutton to one at Witton. At some churches all members were in a class, but since the fifties numbers have varied. There is evidence that numbers are now increasing; some last for a few years, others for decades, often depending on the persistence and leadership qualities of one person. Some have grown into full meetings with 30 or more members, but the average membership is probably ten or less. One long established class in the circuit has seen a number of its members become

local preachers and ministers over the years, due in no small part to its leadership and influence.

A revival in the 80's has led to a variety of classes being established, some devoted to Bible study, others with a varied programme of religious and secular speakers. In some classes social events are frequent but all have a basic culture of fellowship and pastoral care. Many people will have fond memories of their time in a class meeting, and the friends and acquaintances they made as a result.