Local churches for the 21st century:

A strategic challenge

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Introduction

In 1996 the earlier version of this booklet was published under the title of *Local churches for a new century: a strategic challenge.* Many comments have suggested that it was of value, even inspiration. It has been described as a manifesto for local churches of Brethren background. For some time it has been out of print, and others have been anxious that I should prepare a new edition.

This has presented a dilemma. Should a completely different booklet be written, one which ignores the Brethren context and which asks, what kind of local churches are best suited to the cultural context in western Europe today? Or is it worth revising the earlier text largely in its previous form?

A booklet on the first lines is certainly needed. Since the earlier booklet was written, much has been written from academic and pastoral perspectives on the way in which local church life needs to be adapted in order to reach Western secular society in an effective manner. There is a need to distill this thinking in summary form, so as to make it readily useful for the average church leader, especially the church leader who has a full-time job alongside the task of church leadership. It can also be argued that some of the characteristic Brethren understandings of the nature of the local church, what character it should have, and how it ought to operate, are highly relevant to today's cultural context in the West. I do have in mind to prepare such a booklet in due course.

But a considerable number of people have said that they think that it is worth revising the existing booklet for leaders of local churches which are, at least in certain respects, still recognisably Brethren in character. There is certainly a

substantial audience of that kind outside the old English-speaking countries – that is, in the great majority of the 130 or so countries in which local churches owing their origins to the Brethren movement are to be found. For the most part, they do not have the hang-ups about the designation 'Brethren' which are to be found (for partly understandable reasons) among some in the old English-speaking countries. They do not have the doubts or positive rejection which some among the 'were-Brethren' display. Even though much of the analysis in the earlier booklet related to the situation in the British Isles, I believe that it will be of continuing value in many different countries, and the fact that it is in English is less and less a bar to its accessibility to them.

As a matter of fact, however, I believe that, while the other booklet might be more acceptable to those who are anxious to leave the Brethren far behind them, this booklet will still be helpful to them if they care to read it. For even when we are rejecting our spiritual roots, their influence on us remains very powerful indeed. It is all the more so, if we do not actually understand those roots very well. Let me give an example which has nothing to do the Brethren, but which may be controversial nevertheless. In becoming a high churchman, and subsequently a Roman Catholic, John Henry Newman was consciously rejecting his Evangelical origins. Yet those origins still exercised a powerful influence upon him and may have accounted for the suspicion which he long had to endure within Catholicism: I would argue that he was in fact an Evangelical Catholic or a Catholic Evangelical. Similarly, the imprint of Brethrenism on those who are anxious to distance themselves from it is in fact very deep. Moreover, it would be a pity if the 'were-Brethren' were not to continue to profit in their local church lives from some of the valuable principles which they have brought with them from the past. While the context of the booklet is the British Isles, its lessons are certainly applicable among those of Brethren background in north

America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, for example.

Further, I continue to believe the booklet, though relatively little modified, can also be of value to those who have never had any connexion with the Brethren. The prescriptions in section 4 are applicable, if in an adapted form, by many local congregations in the West, in my judgment.

More generally by way of introduction, I want to reassert that it is my conviction that the gospel of Christ is the true and only hope of the world. The consequences of that gospel are blessing both for this creation and the next. So, making disciples (with all that that term implies in the New Testament) must remain the priority of the Church, as one would expect from the fact that Jesus' commission as recorded in *Matthew* 28 clearly applies until the consummation of the age at his return.

Countless individuals and para-church bodies have, and should have, a vital role to play in proclaiming the gospel. But local congregations of believers are intended to have a key role in bringing people to Christ and thereafter discipling them. How many true conversions turn out to be transient for all practical purposes because of the incompetence, carelessness and archaic ambiance of receiving fellowships!

My purpose in this booklet is to encourage, even inspire, the leaderships of local churches to new and more effective efforts in growth, church-planting and discipling, thus fulfilling the Lord's commission. I say, leaderships, because the prime responsibility rests with them. It will be to a great extent their attitudes and actions which determine whether their congregations are the moribund remains of a once-dynamic movement, or whether they facilitate the changes which enable their congregations to participate in the continuing contribution of Evangelicalism to God's work in this century. It is leaderships who will have to explain

whether they buried the treasure in the ground or ensured profitable use.

1

The long view

For perspective, it is worth viewing the present situation of Brethren and 'were-Brethren' churches in the British Isles against the background of the dynamic growth which they experienced in the century up to 1960 and the steep decline since that date. The stark contrast between the two periods to a considerable extent explains the psychological depression which has gripped the Brethren movement in the UK (and in other English-speaking countries) in the last 25 years. For it must be accepted that the glory of the Lord has to a very large extent departed from these churches – though for some there have been positive signs of encouragement in the last decade.

The century of dynamic growth had two key features.

***First*, there were some distinctive ecclesiological ideas relating to the nature of the church, its government and leadership, and the nature of charismatic gifts and ministry in the church. There were also some novel theological emphases, for example, on the structure of scripture, the Second Coming and Christ's future kingdom. These were developed by the founders of the movement in the period 1830 – 50.**

***Second,* there was the influence of the 1859 revival and subsequent Victorian evangelistic campaigns of a pan-denominational character, and a little later of the pan-evangelical spirituality promoted notably by the Keswick movement.**

The first of these has acquired a somewhat mythical status in recent times in the hands of students of Brethren origins. On the progressive side of the movement, they have tended to be somewhat selective, honouring the ecclesiological insights, but abandoning dispensationalist and futurist interpretations, for example.

The second feature was much the more important for the *scale and missionary zeal* of the movement. For that feature was the *motor* of dynamic growth of the Brethren in the century up to 1960, not only in the British Isles but in very many places abroad. Without the influence of the revival and what followed, a significant new denomination would not have appeared on the church scene in the British Isles. Nor would there have been the missionary impulse which carred that denomination to many other places in the Anglo-Saxon world and beyond. In relation to the total size of the sending churches, that impulse was quite remarkable.[1]

It was the first feature, however, which gave this group of churches its *distinctive form and appearance.* Among other things, an important component was a militant non-denominationalism. On the one hand, this has often tended to sectarianism: only the Brethren were 'right', they sometimes considered, even to the extent of doubting whether other Evangelicals were really Christians. On the other hand, since 1970, non-denominationalism on the progressive wing has made an important contribution to the identity crisis of this group of churches and to the feeling that it really ought not to exist or continue to exist.[2]

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1 **For a period something like a number equivalent to 1.5% or more of the total membership of the home congregations was in overseas missionary work.**

2 **This non-denominationalism deserves more attention and analysis than it has received. Open-hearted non-denominationalism was an important and valuable aspect, traceable in part to Brethren origins, of the spiritual stirrings in Evangelicalism in the 1830s which gave rise, among other things to the Brethren movement (see, e.g., Klaus Fiedler, *The story of faith missions*, Oxford: Regnum Lynx, 1994, throughout). But militant**

The motor of growth was very powerful indeed. From approximately 100 local fellowships early in the 1850s (a number probably including Exclusive companies), the Open Brethren fellowships in the British Isles grew to some 1,250 in 1904, and to a peak of 1,750 in 1959 (see the table and diagram on pages 41 and 43). The total number of members and adherents has been harder to estimate. Probably, it ranged between 75,000 and 100,000 in the inter-war period. The growth in the forty years up to 1900 was comparable to that of the New Churches in the period 1960 – 2000. Apart from growth through missionary enterprise in what is now known as the Third World, the impulse of growth spilled over through evangelistic work in the first part of the twentieth century in many countries in eastern Europe. The structure of this growth is, as yet, less clear. In the 1870s and 1880s, many who were already Evangelical Christians were being drawn into Brethren churches from other denominations. Biological growth was important throughout. But it is likely to be demonstrable that much of the growth was conversion growth.[3]

In Britain, because of the social character of the group of churches, and perhaps its 'lay' leadership and non-territorial instincts, local churches in the period of growth tended to change location rapidly with the changing location of population. In the twentieth century, and certainly in the period 1945 – 1960, the Open Brethren were one of the few groups planting new churches in rapidly-growing housing areas. A little of this was planned and facilitated by visionaries such as the house-builder, Sir John Laing. But much of it seems to have been spontaneous from the grass roots. More generally, the group of churches was

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non-denominationalism can so distinguish itself from, and judge, denominational groupings as to make itself sectarian. At the open-hearted end of the spectrum, there are some practical questions about the continuing support of congregational life which simply do not seem to have received attention.

3 **Neil Dickson's *Brethren in Scotland 1838-2000* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press 2003) sheds much new light on these questions.**

characterised by evangelistic endeavour, both within each congregation and outside, for example, through village preaching.

In this period, too, leaders among the Open Brethren were one key element in preserving the testimony of historic Evangelicalism in Britain, as many other formerly Evangelical groupings turned towards theological liberalism. Together with a small group of conservative Evangelical Anglicans, they were, for example, at the heart of new works like the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, the Crusaders and Covenanters movements, and the foundation of London Bible College and the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research. These developments were to have a decisive influence on mid-century Christianity (Evangelical and otherwise) in Britain.

For these churches, this period was one of vigour and authority.

2

Recent experience

The period since 1960 has been characterised by increasingly sharp decline in England and Wales, increasing decline in Scotland, and a steady state in Northern Ireland, attributable perhaps to the special social, religious and political situation there.

In 2002, 1,194 local churches were included in the list in the British Isles, a reduction of 31% in the period since 1960, most of which has occurred since 1975. Nearly 550 such churches have closed in a period of 43 years; some 500 out of the 1,740 included in the 1959 address list have ceased to exist since 1975. The shrinkage was probably a fifth in the 1990s alone.[4] This dramatic reduction in such a short period must give serious concern to anyone who values the potential that any local congregation of believers should represent. It should provoke questions as to why it has come about.

The position with respect to overall numbers of members of this group of churches in the British Isles *may* be a little more encouraging. This is because these churches tend to close only when the number in the particular congregation becomes too small for it to continue. By definition, therefore, the closing churches do not account for large numbers of members *at the time the closure takes place.* Based on the *median* average size of 344 churches

4 **See Graham Brown, *Whatever happened to the Brethren? A survey of local churches in 1998-1999* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press for Partnership Publications, 2003) p. 7, Table 3.**

responding to a survey in 1998-99[5], total Open Brethren numbers in the British Isles in 2002 would have been of the order of 50,000. Since the *mean* average size of the responding churches in 1998-99 was 58 (because a minority of responding churches were quite large), it is possible that the total number in 2002 was rather higher than 50,000.[6] Peter Brierley puts the number at about 67,500 in the *United Kingdom* in 2002 with a decline of 9,500 since 1990.[7]

Overall, the total number appears to be some 30% - 50% below the level of the speculative estimates already mentioned for the early part of the twentieth century. That decline needs, however, to be viewed in the light of the general decline in church membership and attendance in the British Isles. And those attending churches of Brethren background still account for 4 – 6% of Evangelical Christians in the United Kingdom. It is so sufficient a proportion that we ought not simply to walk away from these churches as a hopeless case, incapable of rescue and recovery.

Even if the difficulties of the group of churches were to be reversed immediately, the decline in the number of congregations would be bound to continue for a while. Many congregations are small and composed only of elderly people. Their chances of recovery as churches are very slim indeed. So more closures are inevitable. It would take time for a new, widespread movement of church-planting, if it were to happen, to equal the rate of closure.

This decline has been accompanied by, and indeed may in part be a consequence of, a deep crisis of identity among many about how they wish to be known and about whether there is anything distinctive about them which is worth

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5 ***Ibid.*, pp. 8 & 9, Tables 4 & 5.**

6 **The number of congregations on which all these figures are based includes congregations which have their background in the denomination but which might no longer describe themselves as such.**

7 ***UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends No. 4 (*London: Christian Research, 2003) p. 9.4, Table 9.4.2.**

preserving as being biblical. This sentiment is deeper in England and Wales than in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but there are signs that it is beginning to take hold in those countries too. This runs so deep that a few congregations have already preferred to identify themselves with other church groupings, whether in the New Churches or in the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches. This tends to occur particularly where the churches concerned have appointed leaders drawn from those backgrounds (it is interesting that those leaders clearly do not have doubts about *their* particular denominational background). More generally, the doubts reflect the (from one point of view welcome) weakening of denominational identity and loyalty, of course. The Brethren can lay claim to some paternity in the non-denominational trend of our times.

A further important factor, encouraging these doubts about identity, is the image problems which result from misguided association in people's minds with criticism of the Taylorite Exclusives on TV and in the newspapers. Added to this are the ignorance and suspicions about the Brethren which are still widely to be found among Evangelicals generally. This has deep historical roots, going back to the early Brethren's questioning of, for example, ordination as a principle.

Taken together, these questions surrounding identity do lead to a question whether the grouping of churches would do best to attempt the difficult operation of re-branding itself under a different name! That has been suggested by some.

This is however to anticipate questions of policy. First, we should ask what are the reasons for the rapid and catastrophic decline of the last 30 years. I offer eight as follows.

1. Spiritual pride

The Open Brethren in the period 1950 – 1970 (with roots stretching much further back) in general concluded that God was uniquely blessing them, that their church form and

practice was *the* New Testament form and practice, and that they had nothing to learn from other denominations or even from people who raised questions within their ranks. Entwined in this was a theological strand traceable to the early days. That was the erroneous belief that God's blessing would automatically result, indeed that it had automatically resulted, from the establishment of New Testament form and practice. (The reality was the reverse: God had blessed in revival and those blessed had then adopted the form and practice which happened to be at hand, thanks to a small number of pioneers in the period 1830 – 50.) There is a warning here for every church grouping which becomes fixated on the perfection of its ecclesiological interpretations.

2. Lack of scope for energetic leadership

By the second half of the twentieth century, many churches were in the hands of aging leaderships of limited vision. They were simply unwilling to countenance, let alone encourage, younger gifted people and the changes that they believed to be necessary. Succession planning was not in the leaders' minds. Younger people were therefore kept on a very tight rein. This led them to seek outlet for their gifts in non-denominational parachurch bodies and, increasingly, in other denominations. There, their habit of exercising gift and expecting to work hard (which they had been taught in the Brethren) caused them to be welcomed with open arms!

3. Negative response to the Charismatic movement

Again for historical and theological reasons, the influence and manifestations of the Charismatic movement were rigorously and rigidly resisted. This partly reflected the cerebral attitude of mid-twentieth century Evangelicalism which (not a little out of response to the dominant rationalism of the day) was fearful of the charge of emotionalism in religion. In this, the Brethren, like many other Evangelicals, were putting a distinct distance between themselves and the revivalism and Keswick emphases which

had to a large extent shaped Evangelical spirituality in the early part of the twentieth century. It also partly reflected the early Brethren's brush with Edward Irving in the 1830s. This led to a theological veto on the 'sign' gifts, a veto which, inconsistently, was held in parallel with a theologically charismatic view of spiritual gifts generally. The movement had, however, also inculcated the principle, right up to the 1960s and 1970s, that scripture ought resolutely to be followed and applied, wherever it led. When some did just that with respect to their understanding of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, it was made clear to them that there was no room for them and they were driven out, often to found and lead what are now New Churches. Their former fellowships could not afford this further loss of youthful leadership potential.

4. Failure to adapt forms and structures to the needs of the day

Particularly in evangelism and in forms of worship, there was a failure to seek or allow necessary changes in forms and structure. This was, in fact, at odds with the fundamentally-radical approach to church life which the theology of the movement derived from scripture. In the nineteenth century, the Brethren had readily adopted forms and structures which were conducive to effective evangelism. The 'gospel meeting', for example, had been in its day a relatively-informal occasion, following the style of tent-meetings, which offered a welcome venue for the middle and working classes to spend their Sunday-evening leisure time (and provided a respectable place for the unmarried to meet the opposite sex!). Tent meetings were an example of harnessing a new, cheap technology to the cause of the gospel, just as was the use of gospel cars early in the twentieth century. People would still stop and listen at open-air meetings, just as they would attend political meetings in those days. Nor was the use of the term 'hall' to describe the place of worship simply a question of theology requiring the use of 'church' to describe the people rather than the building. 'Hall' was familiar to the

unchurched through the 'music hall', the 'Volunteer hall' and the 'Co-operative hall'.

Why the Brethren were so slow, compared with the New Churches, to adapt form and structure in the second half of the twentieth century is, in view of their history and theology, mysterious. To my mind, it is evidence of a new sluggishness in adapting to the cultural needs of the time, a sluggishness which in principle the theology vehemently rejected. More generally, by the 1950s and 1960s, Brethren churches were slow to harness the cultural and technological opportunities of the day to the cause of the gospel and the retention of younger members. This was not helped by the belief that the particular form of open worship that they had developed in the nineteenth century was precisely biblical in all its details.

5. Neglect of diligent and effective pastoral care

There is no doubt that, increasingly, individuals and congregations came to feel that they were not being given proper pastoral care by their leaders. This was palpable in many fellowships, even in the most progressive and lively. It is not easy to explain. It may have been attributable to lack of training of elders and others. It may have been assumed that, as an expression of Christian fellowship and love, church members would, making use of their innate spiritual gifts, automatically care for one another, without guidance, encouragement and leadership. There may also have been a theological element: thanks perhaps to the influence of the holiness movements, it may have been assumed that mature Christians were spiritual athletes who did not need pastoral support – whereas even spiritual athletes will be touched by human weakness and will from time to time need pastoral care (as did Paul – see *2 Tim. 4*). Among the English, there may have been a cultural element, related to the principle of the 'stiff upper lip' and the belief that people should not bother others with their emotional and psychological problems.

Leaders may also have been overtaken by rising expectations on the part of congregations influenced by individualism, psychology and existentialism. Whatever the reason, this lack of pastoral care was a major source of disillusionment which drove many to pastures where they believed there would be more competent, diligent and trained shepherds to care for them.

6. Restrictions on the public ministry, participation and involvement of women

Despite the involvement of women in public ministry, particularly in evangelism in some places in the early days, the Brethren quickly excluded women from public participation in mixed gatherings and generally from prominent position in congregations. Their ministry was among women and in the home, though women did carve a much larger role for themselves overseas on the mission field. In comparison with other Evangelicals, this was a particularly rigorous view: silence and covering were complete, whereas even Strict Baptists permitted female prayer in the prayer meeting and head covering was not mandatory.

In the twentieth century, this position became increasingly at odds with the position which women were accorded in society. Many women in Brethren congregations could not tolerate it any longer, and certainly not for their daughters. Their men-folk went with them.

7. Adoption of rigorous independence by local churches

In the 1960s, led by the progressive side of the movement and influenced by contact with some of Reformed persuasion, even greater stress was laid on the independence of the local church. This was coupled with a biblically-questionable belief that God provides *every* local church, however small, with all the gifts it needs for its maintenance and growth. The corollary was to cut off churches from each other. Growing and effective churches

felt that they had no obligations towards other churches of a similar tradition. Often, too, these progressive churches adopt a non-denominational stance derived from Brethren ecclesiology (and they often have leaders whose heritage and allegiance is in fact to the Baptists or the FIEC). The position of extreme autonomy and independence also undermined the informal networks and opportunities for inter-church contacts, typified by the former Saturday and Bank Holiday conferences. These networks and events underpinned the informal folk culture and identity of the movement (giving opportunities for doing business and courting as well as denominational life!). They were running out of steam by the 1960s, but the assertion of the independence and self-sufficiency of the local church dealt them a further blow.[8]

8. The popular public image of the Brethren

Since the 1950s, the Open Brethren in some English-speaking countries have had to bear the burden of confusion in the popular mind with the excesses of the Taylorite Exclusive Brethren. These churches have undoubtedly been victims of guilt by association, particularly with Taylorite practices which have led to the break-up of families and the suicide of some teenagers, as publicised on TV and in the tabloid press. This is coupled with considerable ignorance, mystification, and even fear, among other Evangelicals. This is traceable right back to the 1840s. Unfortunately, too, there has been some public mockery of the Brethren by Evangelical leaders, a mockery to which other traditionalist Evangelicals have not been subject.

Undoubtedly, some have moved to other denominations to escape this opprobrium.[9] But all this has also led some

8 **Nothing in this paragraph should be taken as undermining the importance of open-hearted, non- and inter-denominational attitudes in biblical Christians.**

9 **In addition to all the reasons for leaving noted above, some more mature people have left for a richer (in their mind), more liturgical form of worship. This, however, has been happening for decades, though it may**

church leaders to distance themselves from the 'B-word'. They say, many of our people don't know we are, or have a background in, the Brethren and they wouldn't understand it if we did. In view of the guilt by association, this is to some considerable extent understandable. But it certainly reinforces the crisis of identity on the progressive side of the movement and therefore undermines the collective effectiveness of the grouping of churches. Baptist, Anglican and Pentecostal Evangelicals, for example, do not feel guilty about their background in the way that many leaders of Brethren churches do. This is strange because each of those groupings also has reasons for modesty! All four groupings have good reason for celebration as well as sorrow about their pasts, of course.

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have been accelerated by the introduction of quasi-Charismatic styles of worship in the more progressive churches.

3

The present situation

If we turn to current opportunities, there are important differences between the countries in the British Isles. I know little of the Republic of Ireland. My impression of Northern Ireland is one of much conservative traditionalism in the different streams of the movement there. There is, however, a few large churches which have distanced themselves from the rest and are going their own way as self-consciously non-denominational churches. They appeal to those who have broader perspectives on the church scene, and perhaps much else, in the province. In Scotland, a group of perhaps as many as 50 churches (out of 210 in 2002) seem to be distinguishing themselves from the smaller, more conservative fellowships. These 50, on the whole, seem to think better of their Brethren identity than many churches south of the border.

In England and Wales, three groups of churches can be identified:

1. **A considerable number of conservative, traditional assemblies. These are often small and many are likely to close in the next few years as a result of the age of the members. There are, however, clearly a few strong, active congregations of this type.**

2. **A substantial group, growing in number, of medium-sized and larger churches. These have changed and continue to change rapidly. They identify themselves**

with Evangelicalism broadly. They are normally members of the Evangelical Alliance. They make use of many Evangelical and Charismatic resources, such as the annual conferences like Spring Harvest and New Wine. A few of these churches are openly Charismatic and look towards New Church groupings such as Ichthus and New Frontiers International. Most, in any case, are openly tolerant towards Charismatic phenomena and the Charismatic movement. Most employ salaried staff as full-time elders, pastors, youth leaders or administrators. The larger churches have a number of salaried staff, but also have significant input from people in a position to support themselves and from 'tentmakers'. Women participate orally in public worship and ministry, frequently without any restriction. These churches tend to be strongly independent of each other and wary of acknowledging their Brethren background. Publicly, they would say that they are non-denominational or 'independent Evangelical' (though in general their character would be different from the denomination of that name). Privately, the leaders would say that they 'were Brethren'. (Indeed, the 'were-Brethren' threaten to be a new denomination!) Interestingly, however, outsiders would recognise their Brethren origins very quickly. They have a wide missionary interest and commend via both Echoes and other agencies. This group may amount to as many as 200 churches in England and Wales. Including some twenty in Scotland and Northern Ireland, over 150 are members of Partnership.

3. **There is a middle group of an uncertain, but possibly declining, number. These have not changed as much or as rapidly as the preceding group. But they do tend to be discontented with their current condition and anxious to see a decisive renewal of God's blessing. Sometimes, they seem to be not very sure**

how to proceed. There may be differences of view within the individual congregation and a lack of competent decisive leadership. With the right spiritual leadership, they may well be capable of change and growth.

Apart from a comparatively small group of larger churches, the churches of all three types are not growing. Indeed, the Partnership survey of 1988-99 suggests a further slight decline in median average membership. Some are declining sharply and many of the smallest will disappear with the current generation of believers. Many of these churches maintain heavy programmes of activity and are often overburdened. Many also have gifted members, both men and women. But at best they are doing no more than to maintain their existing numbers. Some excellent camps work is done, and in some places good youth work continues. But the churches do not see much of the fruit of this work, in the case of the first and third groups identified above because they have not adapted their arrangements to be at all appealing to young converts. There is little church-planting, though an organisation (the Church Planting Initiative) has been created recently to address this need. In many places, however, there is a more or less burning desire to see dramatic growth and renewal. There is much wistful yearning for earlier days of fruitful service.

The second and third groups, in particular, are affected by the growing tendency towards ready denominational transfer. Denominational loyalty is now much weaker than hitherto, and people join the local church which most appeals to them, particularly for relational reasons. This often enhances identity problems in the receiving fellowship, or leaders consider that it must do so. The inner workings of churches of this type often tend to be learned by processes akin to folk-lore rather than through systematic rational communication, though the larger, more progressive churches are definitely improving in this respect. Where significant numbers of members are unconscious of their

local church's background, and bring other sets of historical preconceptions with them, further challenges to the sense of identity of the host church are inevitable. This is particularly true where the host church's leaders have doubts about (or are actively hostile to) the identity of the church and do nothing to refer to its background, strengths and weaknesses. This will inevitably lead to a free-floating independent church, or to adherence to some other denominational grouping, unless something is done urgently about the other, more practical weaknesses of the churches concerned.

Separate from this analysis is a small group of the larger churches which have even more radically changed in character and style. The evidence is that they are growing strongly. But they are probably doing so largely through transfer growth rather than conversion growth. They are taking advantage of the higher degree of locational movement common in today's society and making themselves more attractive to Christian incomers to the area than the other local churches in that area.[10] Normally, in England at least, they do not openly identify themselves with their origins.

10 **See Graham Brown, *Whatever happened to the Brethren? A survey of local churches in 1998-1999* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003).**

4

Strategic responses

How are the local churches of this background in the UK to flourish again and enjoy times of renewed spiritual blessing as instruments of God's kingdom? I offer some strategic pointers, based on my personal assessment and experience. They assume that God's purpose for each local church is that (apart from complete depopulation of its area) it should grow spiritually and numerically, that it should plant out new congregations, and that it should play its part in implementing the commission to preach the gospel and make disciples to the ends of the earth.

My suggestions do not assume that a distinct group of Open Brethren churches must continue to exist for all time. By the same token, however, they do not assume either that this group of churches has forfeited all right to further divine blessing and has no right to existence as a denominational grouping. Rather, my suggestions assume that many of the remaining congregations in the UK, to say nothing of a whole host of congregations across the world, could still make a valuable contribution to the Lord's work. They also assume that they are heirs to some key insights about the Church and its work which are more than ever capable of being of value today. While the suggestions have particularly in mind the situation in the UK, there is some evidence that they are relevant in quite a number of other countries as well.

1. The need for spiritual renewal

There is an evident need for a general renewal of deep spiritual experience of the Lord in these churches. In

general, they have been passed by in the spiritual renewals of the past 50 years, partly for the reasons given in preceding sections. This is not necessarily to be taken as a recommendation that they should become 'Charismatic' or experience the 'Toronto blessing' or the latest similar manifestation. But as a whole, these congregations are somewhat like the man at the pool of Bethesda: while they often long for renewal, it appears that others reach the water first.

These congregations certainly should not be too proud to seek vibrant, genuine spiritual experience on the grounds that it is what other spiritual groupings have invented it and we must invent things for ourselves! True spiritual experience must, of course, be authentic for the particular group or individual. But it is not an essential condition of authenticity that the nature of the experience should be home-grown. The desire that it should be can itself be a form of spiritual pride: 'we must do it *our* way'. It can extend to methods as well as spiritual experience, for example, to an unwillingness to use approaches like 'Willow Creek' and 'Alpha' rather than something home-grown.

2. Renewal of inner motivation

Renewal of experience of the Lord and relationship with him – a renewal of spiritual interest – seems to be an essential pre-condition of a renewal of motivation across whole congregations. In many places, such a renewal of inner motivation to serve the Lord is badly needed. This kind of motivation characterised this group of churches in former years. It released 'lay' ministry on the scale that was essential if substantial congregations were to be maintained with little or no full-time staff input. In the absence of renewed motivation, there will be no alternative to either refuge in the false security of traditionalism (leading in due course to the death of the congregations concerned) or professionalisation of ministry, that is, staff who are paid to do what ordinary members of congregations are no longer willing to do for themselves.

This loss of motivation across Christian congregations is not a phenomenon special to the churches with which this booklet is particularly concerned. It is a phenomenon of the individualistic, consumerist culture of the West. This leads people to give priority to satisfying their own perceived needs and protecting their leisure time for their own purposes. It requires great spiritual commitment and experience of the Lord if such cultural expectations are to be overcome in the individual and family unit. Otherwise, the psychological sacrifices of congregational service will not be made. In the absence of this commitment, the natural reaction is for individuals to give less and less time to congregational activity. They prefer to employ others to do the work, rather as medieval landowners employed substitutes to undertake their personal duty of military service for them. The vicarious performance of Christian service is the essence of priestliness, of course. So this phenomenon is an aspect of the erosion of the principle of the priesthood of all believers, which is taking place in some parts of Evangelicalism, just at a time when theologians are tending to emphasise the principle.[11]

The motivation and mobilisation of whole congregations in ministry of all kinds, including spiritual, evangelistic, teaching, pastoral, healing, practical and social care, must remain one of the great goals if fellowships are to be effective for the Lord in today's secularised European society. Renewal of spiritual vigour and practical motivation are essential if this is to happen.

3. Renewed use of spiritual gifts

11 **This analysis should not be interpreted as arguing that there is not an important place for what is called full-time Christian service. I am simply arguing that employing someone to do Christian service on our behalf is a bad reason for encouraging full-time Christian service. It is also misguided because the presence of full-time workers usually increases demands on the rest of the congregation rather than the reverse!**

These churches need to see a new impulse in using the full variety of spiritual gifts – all twenty or more of them - which the Holy Spirit has conferred upon the Church. It needs to be a prime goal of leadership to release, train, deploy and encourage these gifts. This requires leaderships which provide vision, inspiration and encouragement under the Lord. Such leadership, whether full-time or otherwise, must not seek to do everything themselves. They must not feel threatened by the widespread use of gift, and indeed exercise of leadership, in the congregation. This requires less desire for the security of control. Politicians are by no means the only control freaks in our society! It requires that existing leaders trust the Lord to maintain their leadership positions, if he chooses to do so.

This again calls for self-discipline and self-sacrifice on the part of ordinary church members. It is the easy course to sit back and let others exercise their spiritual gifts if they wish to do so. It entails no risk of failure or of criticism. It requires no effort. It is however to be guilty of burying the gift in the ground. (*Matt.* 25: 14 – 30). It also deprives the congregation of the means which God has laid down for building up, strengthening and encouraging the congregation. Not the least of its defects is therefore that it deprives others. (*1 Cor.* 12: 7 & *Eph.* 4: 12 – 13). Congregations cannot be strong without the liberal use of the spiritual gifts which God has given them.

4. Vision, inspiration and leadership

These churches often need their leaders to rediscover their obligation under the Lord to provide vision, inspiration and leadership to the flock. To that end and guided by the Lord, they need to analyse the situation of the congregation and to think strategically about its work and ministry. Without this positive leadership and direction, the essential work of pastoral care is likely to be no more than a maintenance activity. More generally, leaders need to shift decisively away from a mere maintenance mentality and towards seeking spiritual and numerical growth and opportunities to

plant new churches. In our current European circumstances, we have too often become content with maintaining our existing numbers or stemming the decline, rather than expecting growth. Many congregations are crying out for leaders who will lead and be seen to lead, rather than apparently being paralysed by the scale of the task or content to follow where the majority of the congregation appear to want to go.

5. Better pastoral care

In many such churches, it continues to be necessary to achieve a dramatic improvement in the quality, diligence and effectiveness of pastoral care. This applies both to formal pastoral care by leaderships and the informal pastoral care which church members should give to each other as a a matter of course. This group of churches used to hold Christian fellowship and care for one another in high esteem. Hospitality was a prime virtue as was the collection for the poor saints. So it is remarkable that they have neglected pastoral care, indeed, that church leaders do not seem to have had a very clear grasp of what was required, and have certainly found it difficult to organise themselves effectively to provide it.

This is not a question, as so often seems to be assumed, of acquiring advanced skills in counselling and psychotherapy. There may be room for one to two people in each congregation to train in order to develop such skills. And in stressed Western society, congregations should certainly work together to provide such services. But leaderships should not allow such considerations to disqualify them from, and de-skill them for, the ordinary and necessary business of congregational pastoral care. This is simply a question of giving priority to staying in touch with and, as necessary, visiting those in particular spiritual and practical need, sharing their sufferings, listening carefully to them and praying with them. It is a question of being alert to such needs, of keeping the pastoral ear to the ground, of being accessible and easily approachable, of taking the

initiative with people on both the spiritual and practical planes. It should be a comparatively simple matter for leaderships to make improvements in this area. The benefit of action would be seen quickly.

Congregations are looking to leaderships for better pastoral care, and leaderships must respond accordingly. But at the same time leaderships should not neglect the importance of encouraging church members to care for one another more lovingly and diligently. Pastoral gift is not confined to leadership groups. Leaderships need to set an example and to encourage the use of the gift wherever it is to be found in the congregation. This is, of course, an area in which women can be encouraged to use their spiritual gifts by supportive attitudes and encouragement by leaderships.

6. Culturally-relevant evangelism

There needs to be a new impulse in culturally-relevant evangelism – by which I mean *forms* and *methods* of evangelism which are psychologically and socially suited to the people whom we are trying to reach. It has often been said that modern Christians expect others to come, rather than expecting to go to reach them. This is not simply a physical question. We need as individual Christians and as congregations to 'go' culturally, in order to meet people where they are psychologically, culturally and socially. This requires careful scrutiny and overhaul of our forms and methods in outreach.

It certainly means making more use of our greatest asset in evangelism, that is, the contacts of existing church members with their families, friends, and work- and school-mates. Effective 'friendship evangelism' needs to be encouraged. Study after study has demonstrated for many years that a key factor in most conversions is prior contact with someone who is a Christian. Effective 'friendship evangelism' includes encouraging church members to build relationships with some people who are not at present

Christian; for the Christian life can become extremely introverted.

Relationship-building is a key requirement in effective evangelism. This appears to be truer today even than it was in the past. In today's secular environment, people are suspicious of what we say until they acquire sufficient knowledge of and trust in us to begin to be receptive to what we say. They must therefore be allowed to become part of the group, whether it is the fellowship as a whole or a smaller group, rather than differentiated from it and excluded from it. The traditional approach to the non-Christian, making it only too clear from the start that he or she did not belong until converted, is precisely what not to do today. (It is not beyond leaderships and church members to know who the believers are, and nothing is served by rubbing the unbeliever's nose in his or her unbelief.)

Culturally-relevant evangelism requires for some churches a radical overhaul of their pattern of meetings. Above all, it needs to be recognised that, at present, the most likely time that people can be expected to attend a church service or meeting (if they are among the 10 – 15% who are likely to do so at all) is on Sunday morning.[12]

For some churches, this presents a challenge for deeply-held traditions and convictions about the structure of the weekly programme. If Sunday morning is now 'prime time' for reaching a significant group of non-Christians with the gospel, then this implies more than tinkering with a traditional Sunday morning programme. It is likely to be impossible to give priority for the 'breaking of bread' in its historic form. That *form*, as distinct from the mandatory

12 **On the relative scales of attendance on Sunday morning as against other times, see Peter Brierley and Fergus Macdonald, *Prospects for Scotland 2000: trends and tables from the 1994 Scottish Church Census* (Edinburgh and London: The National Bible Society of Scotland and Christian Research Association 1995) p. 114.**

principle of regular participation in bread and wine in memory of Christ and his work, has no particular scriptural warrant anyway. The form presents difficulties for many younger Christians, especially for those who are unfamiliar with the particular style of meeting. As others have observed, local churches today must, if they do nothing else, ensure that on Sunday morning they give priority to a culturally-relevant meeting with lively, enjoyable, genuine worship and stimulating, but not over-lengthy, teaching of scripture. Communion can, and perhaps should, be included, but in an appropriate form. And it may even be that, in our particular circumstances, the Lord would expect us to remember him in communion at some other time, even at some inconvenience to ourselves.

More generally, leaderships must ensure that the structure and arrangements for meetings which have an outreach element are such that church members will be confident that they will not be ashamed if their bring their friends and relatives. This goes to the building and the décor as much as to form of meeting.

Another important cultural dimension is how the fringe person, whether Christian or not, is treated when they come to a meeting. This is not just a question of treating them as outsiders and implying by our body language that we wish they were dressed 'more respectably' (i.e, 'like us'). Contrariwise, we often make the newcomer dreadfully uncomfortable by being too matey and engaging them in conversation which may seem to them pressing or prying. And we can impose very uncomfortable procedures like the 'Peace' on them. There is a difficult cultural tight-rope to walk here. The visitor is quick to complain that a particular church was cold ('No one spoke to me'), yet they clearly prefer a place where they can slip in quietly at the back or side without anyone noticing, until they have got the measure of it and decide that they like it.

7. New inventiveness in culturally-relevant evangelism

The previous point relates to conventional programmes of local churches. But if they are to be more effective in evangelism, they need a new inventiveness in culturally-relevant evangelism. This is the more essential given that 80% of the population are rarely if ever present at a Christian meeting, that now up to 30% of the population claim not to believe in God in any form, and that many adhere to religions other than Christianity. Effective 'friendship evangelism' is crucial. But beyond that, hard thought needs to be given to identifying the kind of events that they are likely to find pleasurable and interesting, events that they are likely to be willing to attend on the basis of a brief description of them. Normally, this will mean events not on 'church' premises. The typical British mindset is now deeply suspicious of events on 'church' territory. In that respect, the shift to more churchy descriptions of their buildings by many Brethren churches in the UK has been a retrograde step. Ground that the non-Christian perceives as neutral will normally be best.

The small group, tailored to the particular interests of those invited, and held at a restaurant, or pub, or in someone's home, may be most effective. Churches need to make use of small groups as the means of bridging between church events, such as parent and toddler groups and sports events, and the church itself. Very often, it will be too much to expect the contact to step from 'their' specialist, religiously-neutral group straight into a meeting of the church. The bridge can be formed by creating a small exploratory group which is attached to 'their' activity.

There ought to be no problem in the Brethren tradition if those groups become in effect the house church for the individuals concerned, for example, with creating a congregation out of a meeting in a pub or with creating a church out of the women's meeting if the women concerned regard that meeting as in effect 'their' church. But, sadly,

notwithstanding their ecclesiology, the Brethren have become far too hooked on a church life which depends on having church buildings and regarding those buildings as, in some sense, special. This can be a positive hindrance to much evangelism in a post-Christian society.

More generally, a little reflection will suggest that there is a wide range of possibilities, suitable to the variety of people that the particular congregation is likely to be in contact with. The overall aim must be to excite people's interest both in our circle of friendship and in the gospel. There is nothing that says that non-Christians *must* find Christian events boring and old-fashioned if they are to derive spiritual benefit from them. In this context, it should be noted that people, particularly young people, give boredom and associated sentiments as the main reason why they do not attend Christian events or why they stopped attending.[13]

8. Culturally-effective communication

Culturally-relevant evangelism demands a new emphasis on communicating in ways that twenty-first century people will understand. For the local church, this implies decisive adaptation of structures, methods and religious culture to the needs of outreach. More generally, our church life as a whole often needs to change its character. This is not just a question of words, but of everything that our structures, forms, clothing, furnishings, modes of expression, music,

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13 **See, e.g., Peter Brierley, *Reaching and keeping teenagers*, Tunbridge Wells: MARC, 1993, pp. 110, 134 & 139 – 142. It is interesting that, at the time of the research, more than two-thirds of teenagers attending Protestant churches said that they found singing modern songs and hymns the most enjoyable part of the service, and a fifth or less said that they enjoyed the sermon most! (p. 112). The leading reason that adults gave for ceasing to attend church was that they found it irrelevant to their everyday lives and that it was boring (Michael J. Fanstone, *The sheep that got away: why do people leave the church?* (Tunbridge Wells: MARC 1993) p. 62) How have churches responded in the ten years since these results became known?**

songs, and so on, say about us. In this, our theological background gives us full freedom to make the necessary changes and to experiment.

The genius of the New Testament is that it requires conformity only to a limited number of central doctrines. As to the incidentals of church life, it sets out only principles, not blue-prints to be slavishly followed on culture, form, liturgy, music, etc. As others have frequently pointed out, it is humans who are 'religious', that is, who value religious form and pattern for its own sake; in that respect, the scriptures lead us to believe that God is rather 'irreligious'. That means that we only need to be 'religious' in order to reach the 'religious'. In this, we need to be really Pauline. The history of Christianity amply demonstrates that, unlike some other religions, it is effective precisely because it is free to adopt the cultural forms of those whom it is trying to reach. This is something which the Jewish Christians of the New Testament, including Jesus' first disciples, had to learn as their mission extended to the Gentiles. This was the meaning of Peter's vision at Joppa (*Acts* 10: 9 – 11: 18), though there is perhaps a measure of comfort for us in that even Peter did not find it an easy lesson to learn (*Gal.*2: 11 – 13).

9. Culturally-relevant forms in worship

Forms and modes of worship, especially, need to be adapted so as to be culturally relevant. There is an inclination for some to believe that the characteristic form of Brethren worship was very much as the New Testament church worshipped. Happily, the New Testament is in fact largely silent on *how* the early church worshipped. Clearly, it enjoins genuine, authentic, heart-felt worship ('in Spirit and in truth' – *John* 4:24); and freedom of the Spirit to speak in worship, subject to intelligibility and orderliness (*1 Cor.* 14). We know, too, that singing ought to form an important part of worship (*Eph.* 5: 19 – 20; *Col.* 3: 16; and *Rev.*). Subject to these principles, however, the New Testament leaves each generation free to worship in the manner most

meaningful to it. Certainly, we need not be bound to the forms and modes of previous generations, if those forms and modes are no longer useful because no longer meaningful to us. It is possible, indeed probable, that forms of meeting differed between places, even in New Testament times.

As to the practicalities of worship, there is much gift and expertise waiting to be liberated, especially in those under 30 years of age. Here, some courageous loosening of the reins is called for, and some grace on the part of those who may have to make way for them. The latter may have to ask the question, why is that I am so attached to a particular way of worshipping the Lord with others? Are my reasons personal, psychological, or scriptural? Often, of course, we dress the one up as the other. The fear is that while we have been struggling to maintain a dying form, the use of spiritual gift by younger people has fossilised as well.

10. Releasing the resources of women

An important aspect of the need for cultural adaptation on the part of the local churches is with respect to the status and role of women. In considering this, it is essential that we should not simply baptise as Christian the status and role accorded to women in Victorian society or, for that matter, the status and role accorded by secular thought in the twenty-first century. The question that needs to be put to the traditional doctrine is, how much does it owe to Victorian culture and how much is truly biblical. It is the latter which should determine the matter. And where the scriptures are silent, then we are free to act as seems sensible in the particular culture in which we find ourselves.

The position adopted in these churches historically on silence and head-covering, for example, was extreme even by the standards of conservative Evangelicals. The focus of the traditional doctrine was on three particular passages of the New Testament. There was little regard to what the scriptures have to say about the role of women in creation,

the status and role accorded to them by the Lord (in the teeth of the traditional Jewish teaching), and their prominence in *Acts* and in the epistles themselves. This is a question of simple biblical fairness to women. It is also a question of prudence for the churches, since the gifts and resources of women are so often lying under-used or unused. Unless the importance of these questions is recognised, churches of this particular background are bound to be handicapped in twenty-first century Europe. They are unlikely to be able to hold the respect and presence of women, and with their departure they will lose much else as well.

11. Congregations which model the Kingdom

An aspect of culturally-effective communication of the gospel is the need for congregations which demonstrate in practice what Christ's kingdom is like, both in their own internal relations and in their care for others around them. Most, if not all, spiritual renewals and revivals in church history have led to new ventures in caring for the needy and disadvantaged, as an expression of the love of God in his people. That was especially true of Evangelicalism in the nineteenth century. The work of George Müller is fabled among the Brethren and the example influenced many. The Evangelical missionary movement did much good to all, even when it believed that social action *in itself* was futile. Today, local churches are doing much by way of social care and to earn the right to speak to their communities about spiritual issues. All need to model this Kingdom care as a necessary expression of the reality of that Kingdom in this world as well as the next. They need also to demonstrate the obligation of creation care which has not yet been lifted from us as humans. Biblically, this needs to be so, even if Christ may return the day after tomorrow or sooner. We must act thus if our claims of salvation and sanctification are genuine, and are to be seen to be so in this world. Through the Church, salvation in Christ is meant to be good for this world, as well as in the next.

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Above all, if local churches are to be fitted to build the Kingdom in the twenty-first century, we need to recognise that there is no special or necessary relevance in the particular practices of local churches 50, 100 or 150 years ago, or even earlier for that matter. Much of the incidentals of church life grow out the particular cultural and social setting in which those churches were established. Some nineteenth-century Evangelicalism used means and methods which were aptly suited to the times. The Sunday-evening gospel meeting, for example, was admirably suited to the needs of the day, for reasons already given.[14] It soon began to encounter competition, however, from other forms of entertainment in a world of increasing leisure. To some extent at least, the local churches particularly in mind in this booklet adapted well to the needs of suburban life early in the twentieth century, especially to the needs of teenagers. That was an important factor in their continued vibrancy into the middle of the century. Something decisive happened in the 1950s which slowed down the rate of adaptation.

Perhaps a generation of leaders became old and would not let go. Perhaps society accelerated rapidly away from the churches – for the problems of adaptation highlighted in this booklet are not exclusive to the group for which it has been written. What is clear is that local churches in the UK need radical change and a radical increase in effectiveness, in the interests of the survival of Christianity here. Otherwise, they will simply be competing with each other for the same

14 **Evangelical Anglicans invented the Sunday evening service as a tool of outreach early in the nineteenth century. Before that, they did not exist, understandably in a rural world without street lighting. Probably, most of us assume that there were always evening meetings.**

limited market and shuffling discontented members between themselves.

Conclusion:
distinctives, effectiveness and the future

Some may wish to argue that these prescriptions leave little room for denominational 'distinctives'. True, but the Lord's blessing on local churches is of much, much greater importance that the preservation of 'distinctives'. And some distinctions need to be drawn between 'distinctives'! In the final analysis what matters among Brethren 'distinctives' is their insights from scripture about:

- **the plural character of Christian leadership;**
- **the many-sided character and wide scope of spiritual gifts in the church;**
- **the freedom of each member to share in worship and ministry according to their spiritual gifts and practical abilities; and**
- **freedom as to forms, structures, liturgy and other incidentals of church life, a freedom to be exercised at the congregational level.**

These are of course principles which very many Evangelicals would now fully subscribe to, perhaps more so than would the churches whose forebears had the insights themselves. And there is an important sense in which even these particular 'distinctives' are secondary rather than essential matters. They should not be allowed to become shibboleths which divide us from other Christians and which themselves obstruct the Lord's blessing on churches. Nor should they be allowed to prevent us from receiving and profiting from new movements of the Spirit and further steps in God's revelation from his Word to the Church.

Some may be tempted to argue that my emphasis on method, and on the need for constant adaptation of arrangements, implies an abandonment of biblical principle and the scriptural content of the gospel. Far from it. I have no such proposition to modify the essentials of the faith in any respect, or the vigour with which they should be proclaimed, or the authority of scripture in determining doctrine and behaviour. It is only by such proclamation, done in an effective way and in the power of the Spirit, that local churches can be created and maintained at the rate that is needed in our generation. So I am making absolutely no call to adapt the content of our proclamation to meet the supposed views of the hearers, or to accommodate Christian truth to cultural preconceptions, or jettison the authority of the scriptures in matters of faith and conduct. That way lies theological liberalism. That is incapable of reversing the decline of the Church in the West. What is needed is effective, culturally-apt communication, not cultural accommodation.[15]

What sort of future have the churches with which this booklet is mainly concerned? As already indicated, many smaller churches with aging memberships will pass out of existence with the present generation. There are, however, many which could enjoy many years of fruitful ministry if they act on the points which have been made. A considerable number are already taking the necessary steps. Those that survive will be much changed in character. How far they will preserve the best from their ecclesiological heritage is, however, less clear. There are many in leadership who seem to despise that heritage, whether because they are familiar with it or not. We may be witnessing an interesting and rare phenomenon: a denominational grouping which is passing out of existence by the deliberate decision of a substantial portion of its

15 **In this assertion, I recognise that there is a risk that concepts may subtly migrate in meaning in the process of cross-cultural communication. That is a risk which we must guard against in all Christian communication.**

leaders. Whether it is necessary, or will make much difference, is another matter.

Open Brethren congregational growth and decline 1851 - 2002*

(Numbers of congregations)

	1851	1887 †	1897	1904	1922	1933	1951	1959	1970	1975	1983	1991	1995	1997	2002
England & Wales	132‡	575	694	783	933	1,182	1,055	1,227	1,219	1,190	1,128	964	914	878	787
Scotland	2§	184	236	288	331	373	339	324	296	299	274	251	237	228	210
Ireland	**	79	146	165	176	184	183	185	192	191	185	183	203	197	197
British Isles Total		838	1,076	1,236	1,440	1,739	1.577	1,736	1,707	1,680	1,585	1,407	1,357	1,303	1,184

* Figures for 1897-2002 compiled from the various address lists published in the years noted.

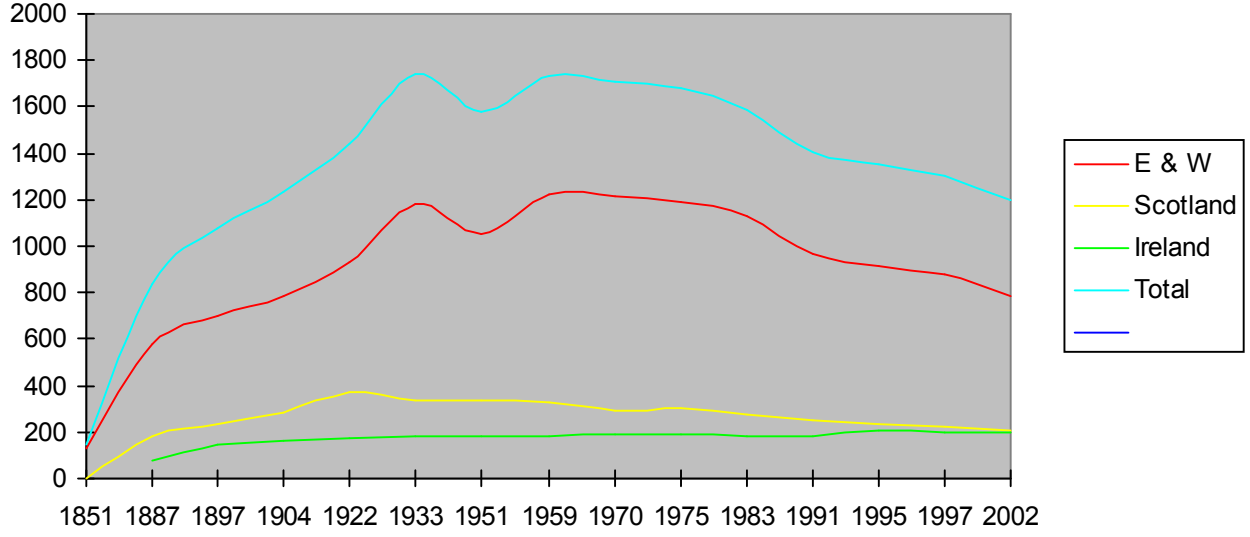
† Figures printed in *The Eleventh Hour,* January 1187, p. 4, from an assembly list not traced.

‡ Horace Mann's Census of Religious Worship 1851 (see tables in Robert Currie, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 216).

§ Information from Neil Dickson (Troon). In addition, there were about 15 congregations connected with the evangelistic ministry of John Bowes (see Neil Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland, 1838-2000*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003).

** No information known to me.

Congregational growth and decline 1851-2002



(NB: Time ratio on this axis is not constant)