

The beginning of the Baptist presence in Oxford dates to the Civil War, a time of tremendous religious and social upheaval in the life of the nation. Oliver Cromwell's Parliamentary Army entered Oxford in 1646 and drove King Charles I out of the city that had served as the royalist capital throughout the war. Many of the soldiers in the Parliamentary army were Baptists and some soon started preaching in the city. A congregation soon formed, the membership of which was mainly made up of Oxford tradesmen and artisans and their families. A number of these Baptists became prominent civic leaders in the city of Oxford. The earliest date from which we can trace a continuous Baptist community in Oxford is 11 March 1656 when the Church sent messengers or delegates to the meeting of the Berkshire Baptist Association at Tetsworth. The first record of Baptists performing public baptisms is dated to December of 1659, when Lawrence King, a glover and respected tradesman in the city, baptized a number of converts in the river near the home of Richard Tidmarsh, a tanner, who was their first minister. This took place on the banks of the river that flows under Pacey's Bridge in Park End Street. A commemorative plaque is on the bridge and Tidmarsh Lane, named in honour of the Baptist leader, is nearby.

Tidmarsh and other members of his congregation, as well as Independents, Presbyterians and Quakers, in the city, suffered fines and imprisonment on many occasions during the 1660s. In 1672 Tidmarsh and King registered their homes as a Baptist meeting place under the provisions of the *Declaration of Indulgence*, and gained a temporary reprieve from persecution by ecclesiastical courts. A firmer legal foundation for freedom of religious worship came in 1689 when the *Act of Toleration* enabled the Baptists to register their buildings as authorised places of worship. Tidmarsh was also active in the movement to forge the Baptists into a recognized denomination.

In 1715 both the Baptist and the Presbyterian Meeting Houses were wrecked during Jacobite riots in the city. The two congregations came together in a new building on the present site of the church in 1721. For the next sixty years the church passed through a lean period until in 1780 the congregation was reconstituted under a joint Covenant which allowed membership to those baptised in infancy, upon a profession of faith, as well as to those baptised as believers.

Since 1788, when James Hinton from Bristol Baptist College began a ministry of thirty-five years, all the ministers have in fact been Baptists. Under Hinton's ministry the church had to be rebuilt, or enlarged, twice. In 1819 the present frontage was added. Sunday School work was started and so were new chapels at Woodstock, Littlemore, Eynsham, South Hinksey, Charlton-on-Otmoor and Headington.

After Hinton's death in 1823 the church consolidated its work in the city and the surrounding areas. It supported the work of the Baptist Missionary Society, of which Hinton had been the Secretary for a short while, and the Baptist Union, which began in 1812. One of Hinton's successors, Benjamin Godwin, minister of the church from 1838-45, was very active in the movement for the abolition of slavery and published a number of important books and articles on the subject, notably *Lectures on Slavery* (1836).

In 1882 another long pastorate began with the coming of James Dann. The church had to be enlarged again and a new schoolroom built. More chapels linked with New Road were started, at Botley, Wolvercote and Bayworth. Through its members the church began and has continued to have an influence in civic and university affairs.

In 1934 the church sponsored yet another cause, this time at Cowley, the centre for the major new industry for the city, car production. In 1953 the church celebrated its Ter-Centenary. Since 1945 the church has had to respond to a period of great social change. Our address is now "Bonn Square" which is a thriving centre of commercial, social and administrative life for the city, the county and the whole region.

In 1982 we re-opened our buildings after a major re-development of our site. Four floors of new halls and rooms are at the back, and an attractive new foyer leads up to the Church's Coffee House which is in a 17th century building overlooking Bonn Square. The chapel has been renovated and serves well for cultural functions as well as those of worship. The introduction of several attractive symbolic features by artists is of particular note.

We have developed a Group relationship with the churches at Botley and Eynsham, and more recently, Wolvercote. Ministers and representatives of the three churches meet regularly and joint services are held. The church is also involved in ecumenical activities through Churches Together in Central! Oxford and the three Non-Conformist churches have a special relationship within that group.

New Road Church is especially concerned to make a positive Christian contribution to the city centre community. It is the intention of the church to use the former Coffee House as a resource for the community and our open church programme of hospitality, prayer and music brings people inside the church buildings from Monday to Friday. This is part of our continuing mission to the community around us as are the programmes of concerts, devotional meetings and our promotion of the use of the buildings by the community.

The centre of Oxford is forever changing despite the continuing presence of so many historic buildings in the city. The move towards it becoming a 24 hour city will be something our forebears could not have imagined. However, just as they met the challenge of the need for a distinctive Baptist witness in the villages and developing communities, amongst children and in the new industrial part of the city, so we, enabled by the Holy Spirit, must be ready and willing to meet the challenges of our day.